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The Three Kings

Frank Sawyer

The painting is by Karoly Ferenczy (1862-1917), a Hungarian artist who lived in Transylvania. Many of his paintings have a special style in which nature and human events are combined in blending colours. His biblical scenes often show a surprising viewpoint. In this one, called "The three Kings," he avoids the usual picture of the Magi crossing the desert on camels and shows them in the woods. Perhaps they are lost in thought, or almost losing the path, or assailed by doubts and shadows.

We do not know if they are going to meet Christ or coming home again (let us assume they are following the star). The picture does not show the star, but light gleams on the crowns of the three royal delegates, going to meet the newborn King.

I tried to include some of the above thoughts along with other thoughts in my poem. After familiarizing oneself with this poem, it can be read out loud. The pauses, the changing tone and a variety of emphases need to be created by the reader. It can be read with more than one meaning. There is rhyme, but the changing beat in the lines needs to be adjusted to the plodding or the faster gait. The reader can experiment with these elements to create an interpretation.

There are moments of wonder, joy, doubt, perplexity, weariness, and new hope – the voice should reflect these. The length of the lines is not equal, so the reading should be partly poetic and partly prosaic. Among the half-hidden thoughts is, for example, the statement that the horses neighed which could be a nay-saying sound, but the neighing is positive. The word "fallout" is meant to make us think of things political, economic, military and environmental. The "stray beam of light" is ironic, for it is really a guiding beam which keeps them from going astray. The phrase also comes close to the word "star" (in Greek *astron*, *astr*). Among the unexpected expressions is "star dust" rather than desert sand dust. The phrase "pin pointed" reminds us of a pinpoint of light and a compass, while the hills remind us of Psalm 121, a pilgrimage song of hope. Hills might even suggest that faith can move mountains.

School students could be asked to write about this poem and the painting, answering questions arranged by the teacher to suit the level of the class.

Following the Star

The Magi plodding
on ochre camels from the east
zigzag across red sands,
pursuing indigo rocky hills
following the wink
of the pale white star above:

this excursion
has some unpredicted thrills,
a time
for astrological chats and feasts –
but from heaven's view
a pilgrimage of hope and love

with glittering tracks in desert stardust
along the way
while a choir sings to the world,
to those lost and to the least
who suffer
as the fallout of our century chills

all hopes. But look,
was that a twinkle from above?
I saw it! Didn't you?
Three Wisemen lost in thought
looked skyward from the shadowy woods.
The horses neighed

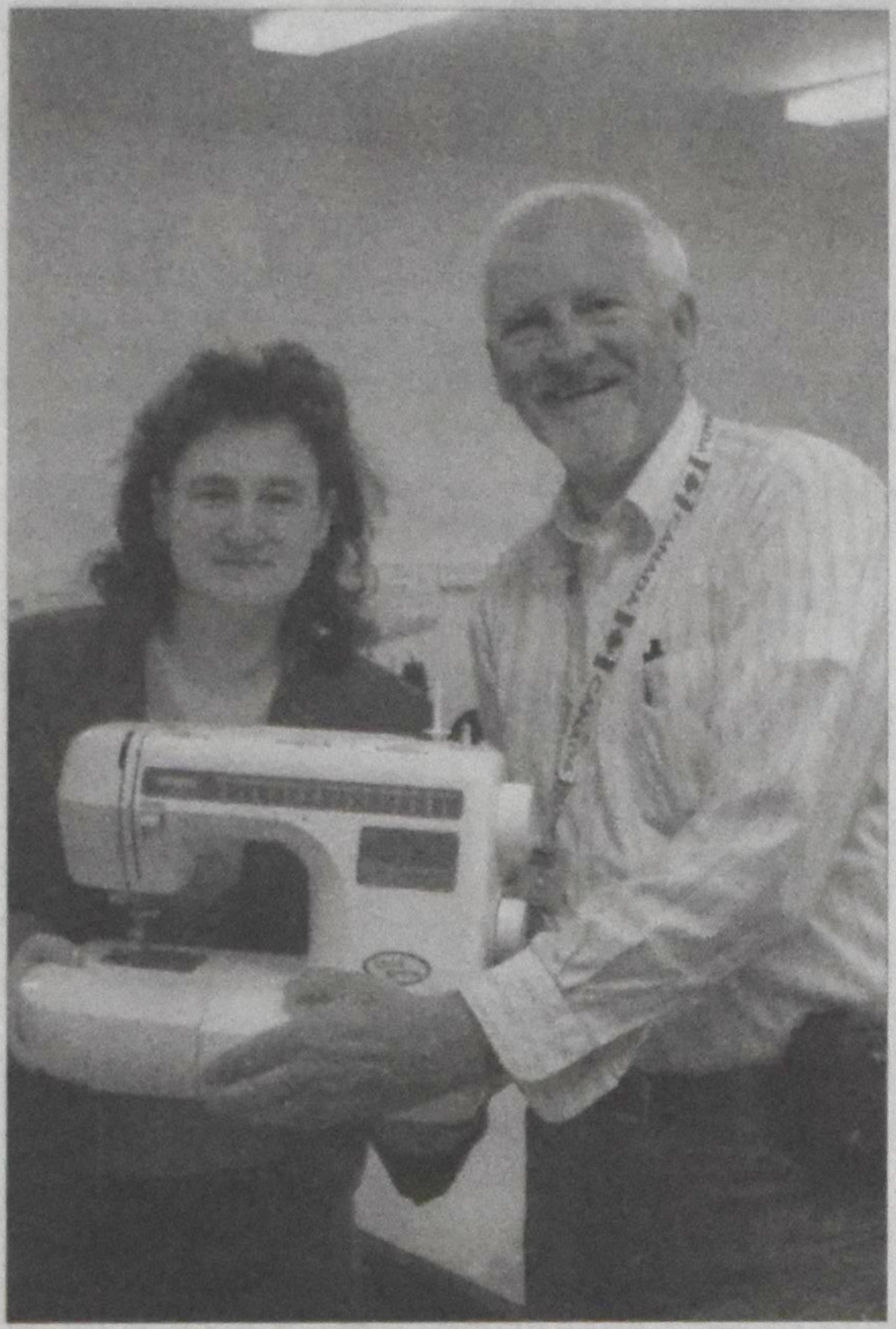
for the event
seemed more certain somehow now
as their gait went forward,
pin pointed toward the hills.
Ignore the weariness that plagues
men and beasts.

It shines!
Over the shadowy figures in the woods
a stray beam of light
gilds their crowns.
Advent hope arises:
Christ descends in a star bright way.

Frank Sawyer (sawyer@t-online.hu) is professor of theology and ethics at Sarospatak Theological School, in Sarospatak, Hungary.

News

Eurovangelism provides aid, hope to Eastern Europe



Brian Lise delivers a much-needed sewing machine.

Brandon Jorritsma

The collapse of communism in Europe 20 years ago has certainly changed how Eurovangelism operates in countries such as Albania, Poland, and Czechoslovakia. Executive Director Reverend Brian Lise once met a worker in Romania who was arrested and interrogated over thirty-five times because of his evangelizing attempts; such punishments are now a thing of the past. Evangelism is now able to be openly incorporated into aid work, in activities such as the shoebox program run by Samaritan's Purse with the assistance of Eurovangelism: five hundred people at a time are able to hear the gospel and receive a shoebox filled with necessities.

Founded in 1965, Eurovangelism was established by David Foster, who began receiving unsolicited donations from readers throughout Europe in response to his weekly column in *The Christian* newspaper, where he described the physical and spiritual poverty in various places in Europe. Shortly after, the huge success of a Billy Graham crusade in Belgrade, Yugoslavia, further revealed the hunger for the gospel. Foster decided to form an organization that could manage the donated finances and address the physical and spiritual needs of the poor and feed the passion that was demonstrated in Belgrade.

Threefold focus

Eurovangelism focuses its resources on three main areas. The first is the support of indigenous workers – ministers and lay people who are native to the country in which work is being done – who work with up to five separate churches. Lise has experienced why the support and training of Nationals is superior to working exclusively with Western missionaries. He says, "I've preached many times in many countries.... When you're preaching you feel so inadequate. And yet you want to talk to the heart of the person." National workers, who know the languages, the customs and traditions, are able to express the gospel in ways that are sensitive and applicable to peoples' situations.

The second area of focus is on humanitarian aid. This includes a wide variety of activity, from vocational training to supplying livestock, food, and building supplies. According to Lise, even though churches now have the freedom to worship in public, for the poor "it hasn't changed." A change in government and economic structure has not benefited them. In some cases, greater integration with the West has made things worse. For instance, many men in Bulgaria are having greater difficulty finding work as a result of their country's recent initiation into the European Union. Lise says, "A lot of the men can't get jobs and they drink. Wife abuse is a real problem." That's why in May 2009, Eurovangelism is planning to renovate a large building to be converted into a shelter for abused women.

Eurovangelism's third area of focus is promotion of the Alpha course. Taking place over shared meals, Alpha has been very effective in introducing Jesus because of its welcoming and casual environment and its orientation to unchurched people. Eurovangelism raises funds to provide the Bibles that all participants of Alpha receive on completion of the course.

Lise emphasizes the continued and desperate need for support by drawing attention to the imbalance between Christian and Muslim mission efforts in Kosovo. There, where most people are nominal Muslims, there are twenty-three churches; in the past twelve years, five hundred new mosques have been built, almost entirely financed by foreigners. Eurovision hopes to counter this movement and guide the people to an alternative faith – the true, Christian faith.

The gift catalogue featured in the last issue of *Christian Courier* – now available online at www.eurovangelism.ca/SITE/giftguide3.htm – allows anyone to support all three areas of work done by the organization. Lise suggests purchasing one of these items in place of a gift you might otherwise give to a family member or friend and giving your loved one a provided card that details just what was given on his or her behalf.

Brandon Jorritsma is a student of journalism who lives in Grimsby, Ontario.

A Dickens of a Thanksgiving

(From the Christian Science Monitor)

As a child, Charles Dickens knew the hazards of credit markets. His father was thrown in debtors' prison. Perhaps that led Dickens to write this in an early work: "Reflect on your present blessings, of which every man has many." He unblinkingly saw goodness in a suffering society, which is not a bad way to observe the year 2008.

For many in today's world, the fear of loss from a swooning stock market and a plunging recession may seem very real. Yet, the act of tallying blessings has a way of melting fear and righting the world.

To compare the current economy to the Great Depression may be a stretch, but these words from a 1934 editorial are particularly relevant today: "To give thanks in prosperous times may seem easy. To give thanks in difficult times may seem all but impossible. But it is never harder to give thanks at one time than at another, if the thanks be given in an understanding of God's invariable goodness."

Gratitude, however, is not simply a passive change of thought or a mouthing of the right words. It usually results in action.

Franklin Roosevelt told Americans during that era that "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself," but he also asked people not to find happiness in material things. Rather, he said, "These dark days will be worth all they cost us if they teach us that our true destiny is not to be ministered unto but to minister to ourselves and to our fellow men."

Christians have a way of ministering to each other at times like these. Families, friends, and congregations open wider the doors that help the poor. These acts of kindness come out of a recognition that much has been received, so much must be given.

The whole world can look back over the past year to see achievements to be grateful for.

At the top of many people's thoughts is a US presidential race that went smoothly with high voter turnout, less scandal, and fewer personal attacks than past contests. Most of all, a big barrier of bigotry was broken with the election of a black president, Barack Obama, while two women, Hillary Rodham Clinton and Sarah Palin, competed vigorously for the highest political offices. The message of these achievements to the rest of the world has yet to be measured, but the effect on Americans is palpable.

Americans also can be thankful that the end of US involvement in Iraq is now in sight. In June, US casualties reached their lowest level since the war began five years ago. With such an improved military situation on the ground and political progress among Iraqis, this conflict now has far less of a polarizing effect on Americans.

Other blessings include an improved public readiness for hurricanes. About 2 million people were successfully evacuated in advance of this season's big storms.

In space research, NASA's Phoenix lander found water on Mars, while in physics, a new particle collider in Europe has begun to probe the conditions that brought time and space into existence.

Coming together to overcome limitations or to set new directions can only be achieved if people have hope. And hope springs from an accounting of the good already received. More than ever, it's time to say, "Count your blessings."

Farmers feed cities, farmers need cities

Jenny Denhartog

Although we still see the yellow "Farmers Feed Cities" signs, the agricultural sector as a whole is in better shape today than it was in 2005, when the slogan was developed by Ontario's grains and oilseed sector in response to a serious farm income crisis. Unfortunately the slogan doesn't adequately describe farmers' total contributions to cities. It also doesn't convey the message that, while farmers feed cities, they also need cities, and they need those cities to be economically viable in order to be a profitable market for the goods and services farmers produce.

"Farmers Feed Cities" is still as valid today as it was in 2005. But farmers and cities, while in some ways far removed from each other, depend on a mutually beneficial relationship that needs both sides of the equation to be economically healthy. Here are just a few examples of why farmers and cities need each other.

Farmers produce not just food for people, but also the ingredients for feed for livestock and pets, and even simple things like bedding material for those hamster and guinea pig cages. A healthy economy is needed for urbanites to spend some of their disposable income on pets and recreational animals.

Farmers feed cities with cleaner air and water, thanks to the environmentally progressive management practices that the farm community has developed. As science evolves, farmers respond by adopting even better practices. Farmers also provide habitat for wildlife and protected species. The CFFO has long been of the opinion that these public Goods and Services need to be paid for by the public.

Farmers grow the Christmas trees that

News

The Shepherds

Their story has been dear to me
Since I was told at mother's knee
How God chose them to be the first
To hear about Messiah's birth.
(I wonder did He feel akin
To shepherds that He favoured them?)

I dwell with them and with their sheep.
On Christmas eve before I sleep.
They make me smile too, when I see
Some of them yawn, like you and me.
And those awake, I hear discuss
The long-awaited promises.

Then suddenly the nightly sky
Turns bright with angels from on high.
First one, then two, a thousand more
Descending out of heaven's door.
And shepherds see before their eyes
A sight denied the rich and wise.

I rush with them to Bethlehem
And kneel, bow down and worship Him
Who left His heav'nly dwelling place
To join and save the human race.

Secure within my Shepherd's keep
I close my eyes and go to sleep.

Didi Prinsen

Painting: "Annunciation to the Shepherds," *Benjamin Gerritsz Cuyp (1612-1652)*

are on display in many urban homes. They also provide cities with the grass seed, the plants and the trees that are part of the urban front and back lawns. They even provide the cut flowers displayed on the dining room table. Urban families need stable jobs and reliable incomes in order to afford these "extras."

Farmers provide access to tracts of land for snowmobile clubs and hunters, ensuring that outdoor recreational activities can take place in large areas across the province.

Ontario's farm organizations need to continue advocating for sufficient government support for the agricultural sector because "Farmers Feed Cities." Given the current economic realities, these organizations also need to recognize and show their support for government assistance programs for other economic sectors in this province. Because "Farmers Need Cities" to provide profitable markets for the goods and services they produce.

Jenny Denhartog is the Field Services Associate of the Christian Farmers Federation of Ontario.

The incarnation: a stumbling block

Principalities & Powers
David T. Koyzis

In the liturgies of some churches, the congregation stands at the reading of the gospel lesson. There may even be a gospel procession in which the celebrant walks down the aisle accompanied by two people, one bearing a candle held aloft to provide the symbolic light and another carrying the book from which the lesson will be read. This is a sign of respect for the gospels, which, uniquely in Scripture, tell the story of Jesus' life, death and resurrection.

It is striking, however, that only two of the gospels, Matthew and Luke, contain infancy narratives. Each provides a different, albeit complementary, account of Jesus' birth, but both agree that he was born in Bethlehem, the city of his remote ancestor David. Mark, whose gospel is much shorter than the other four and is devoted largely to Jesus' deeds rather than his words, does not mention the birth at all, focusing instead on the beginning of his ministry and the inaugural role of John the Baptist.

The God-man

The fourth gospel is different from the three synoptics. If John passes over Jesus' infancy, he nevertheless bears clear testimony to the incarnation:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it (1:1-5 RSV).

God became man in Jesus Christ. This is what we confess weekly in our churches and it's what separates Christians from the followers of the other Abrahamic religions.

A decade ago a former moderator of the United Church of Canada revealed in an interview that he did not believe that Jesus was divine or that he had literally risen from the dead. Naturally this created controversy in his own church and elsewhere, but his doubts are shared by many. After all, if Jesus was a mere human being, even a very good one, and we nevertheless worship him, we are guilty of nothing less than idolatry. This is precisely what Jews and Muslims believe about Christians.

Still foolishness

Yet if God did not become man, we are still in our sins and there is no salvation for us. For no mere human being could bear the weight of God's anger at our sin and thereby release us from it, as the Heidelberg Catechism affirms (Question 14). Only the One who is true God and true Man can work our salvation from the debt of sin (Questions 15-18). This is the message of the gospels and there can be no doubt that it is a stumbling block to many, as Paul puts it (1 Corinthians 1:23), even to some who would otherwise claim the label *Christian*.

Nevertheless, the church has always taught that, read together, the four gospels give us a full understanding of who Christ is. John affirms that God become man in the incarnate Word, while Matthew and Luke relate that the Word-made-flesh was born of an ordinary woman in humble circumstances, far from the centres of political power yet threatening enough to be hunted by an apprehensive local ruler.

God became man in Jesus Christ, a momentous event that is still foolishness to the nations two thousand years later.

David T. Koyzis teaches political science at Redeemer University College, Ancaster, Ontario, and is the author of the award-winning Political Visions and Illusions *(InterVarsity Press). His blog can be found at:* byzantinecalvinist.blogspot.com/

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Editorial

The day the Roman stockmarket fell

Bert Witvoet

The scene was pastoral. The characters were pastoral, too. After all, shepherds are pastors, and pastors are shepherds. It was during the time of the height of the Roman Empire – lots of prosperity, the stock market was strong, the military machine was well-oiled, there was full employment … for slaves. "And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby [Bethlehem], keeping watch over their flocks at night." These lower-class, unskilled labourers were at the bottom of the imperial heap. Yet they were favoured by the King of the Universe. An angel of the Lord appeared to them and brought them fantastic news: "Today, in the town of David, a Saviour has been born to you."

"To whom? …To us? …A Saviour?" Was that a rumbling noise that shook the whole Roman Empire? Something is amiss. How can such an important announcement be made to a band of ragtag sheepherders?

Wonderful words of life

"Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to people on whom his favour rests.'"

We all recognize the words of the hymn sung by the angels in the fields of Ephrata. The shepherds were the lucky ticketholders at that heavenly concert. The angels must have sung in Aramaic for the shepherds to understand what they were singing. It certainly wasn't "Gloria in excelsis Deo" what they heard.

The words are beautiful in whatever language. They speak of glory and of peace. All of us want to experience glory and peace. Ceasar Augustus did, too. He loved peace, and he loved glory even more. He established the *Pax Romana* – a period of relative peace and cultural achievement in the Roman Empire. It was during his reign that the angels sang their Ephrata lyrics. But Augustus had a different glory and peace in mind. He would have loved it had the angels come to Rome and sung, "Glory to Augustus in the highest, and peace in the Roman empire on whom the emperor's favour rests."

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Canada

The peace of larcenists

At that time Augustus was looking forward to the results of the census he had decreed – a census that would cover the whole, vast Roman Empire. The results would help him expand his resources: a bigger army and lots of tax money. If you cooperated with Augustus, his favour would rest on you. The *Pax Romana* would allow you to benefit from the peace and tranquility of his reign.

But it was a peace obtained under duress. A bit like the peace that Somalian pirates extend to the crews and owners of the ships they hijack once the owners give into their demands and expand the pirates' resources. The operation of the pirates is a form of extortion, like that of Augustus. Having learned from other oppressors throughout history, these ship rustlers don't like to be called "pirates." One of them was heard to comment via a radio broadcast that he and his buddies prefer to be called "coast guards" who are entitled to a certain fee because ships pass through nearby (or faraway) waterways. That's *Pax Somalia* for you. Glory to the pirates, and peace to those who cough up millions of dollars.

But these forms of peace are not at all like the peace that Christ brought on earth. Yes, there was a ransom, but Christ paid it himself. His peace is a pure gift to those who accept his favour. Surely, the God who devised this rescue plan deserves all the glory and honour that the angels send out to him.

God's revolution

Today's superpower is called the United States of America. It is and it isn't an empire. Many countries in the world have benefited from the *Pax Americana*. The U.S. has not needed to tax other nations or hold them for ransom. Its multi-national corporations have taken care of that. Its economic and military power has been a force for good and for evil. Of late, we may be witnessing the decline of this empire. There was too much glory to materialism and consumerism all over the Western world and not enough peace to those favoured by God.

That the *Pax Christiana* announced in the fields of Ephrata peace is different from all the other attempts at peace should have been clear from the song that Mary sang months before:

He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.
He has brought down rulers from their thrones
but has lifted up the humble.
He has filled the hungry with good things
but has sent the rich away empty.

This is a revolutionary song addressed at all human attempts at empire or oppression. Glory to God in the highest, because the peace that Jesus brought into this world is thoroughly opposed to what the world has to offer. It fits shepherds far better than emperors.

All she can give

This became vividly clear to me when I read the book *Left to Tell: Discovering God Amidst the Rwandan Holocaust*. Immaculée Ilibagiza, a Tutsi genocide survivor, tells the story of how in the beginning of her life she thought she lived in paradise, a lush countryside overlooking Lake Kivu. "As a young girl, all I knew of the world was the lovely landscape surrounding me, the kindness of my neighbours, and the deep love of my parents and brothers." Immaculée and her family were devout Christians who abhorred racism. *Suddenly there was with Immaculée a host of Satanic killers. And she was sore afraid.* She and her oldest brother miraculously escaped the horrendous slaughter that took the lives of her father, mother and two brothers. Paradise had come to an end.

After the war, her family's killer, a former Hutu neighbour called Félicien, was brought before her.

"Stand up, killer!" Semana [the mayor of Kibuye] shouted. "Stand up and explain to the girl why her family is dead. Explain to her why you murdered her mother and butchered her brother…." Semana shouted even louder, but the battered man remained hunched and kneeling, too embarrassed to stand and face me…. I wept at the sight of his suffering. Félicien had let the devil enter his heart, and the evil had ruined his life like a cancer in his soul. He was now the victim of his victims, destined to live in torment and regret. I was overwhelmed with pity for the man…. "He looted your parents' home and robbed your family's plantation, [Semana shouted]. After he killed Rose and Damascene, he kept looking for you … he wanted you dead so he could take over your property, didn't you, pig?" Semana shouted again…. Félicien was sobbing. I could feel his shame. He looked up at me for only a moment, but our eyes met. I reached out and touched his hands lightly, and quietly said what I'd come to say, "I forgive you."

My heart eased immediately, and I saw the tension release in Félicien's shoulders before Semana pushed him out the door and into the courtyard. Two soldiers yanked Félicien up by his armpits and dragged him back toward his cell. When Semana returned, he was furious.

"What was that all about, Immaculée? That was the man who murdered your family. I brought him to you to question … to spit on if you wanted to. But you forgave him! How could you do that? Why did you forgive him?"

I answered him with the truth: "Forgiveness is all I have to offer."

Here you have it: *Pax Christiana*, in the midst of extreme human cruelty and hatred. It turns everything upside down that passes for truth but is, in fact, the big lie. This is what the angels were singing about: "And on earth peace to people on whom his favour rests." This is what Christ's coming into this world accomplished. The end of all human empires. Reconciliation between God and sinners, between sinners and sinners.

Glory to God in the highest!

CC appoints new editors

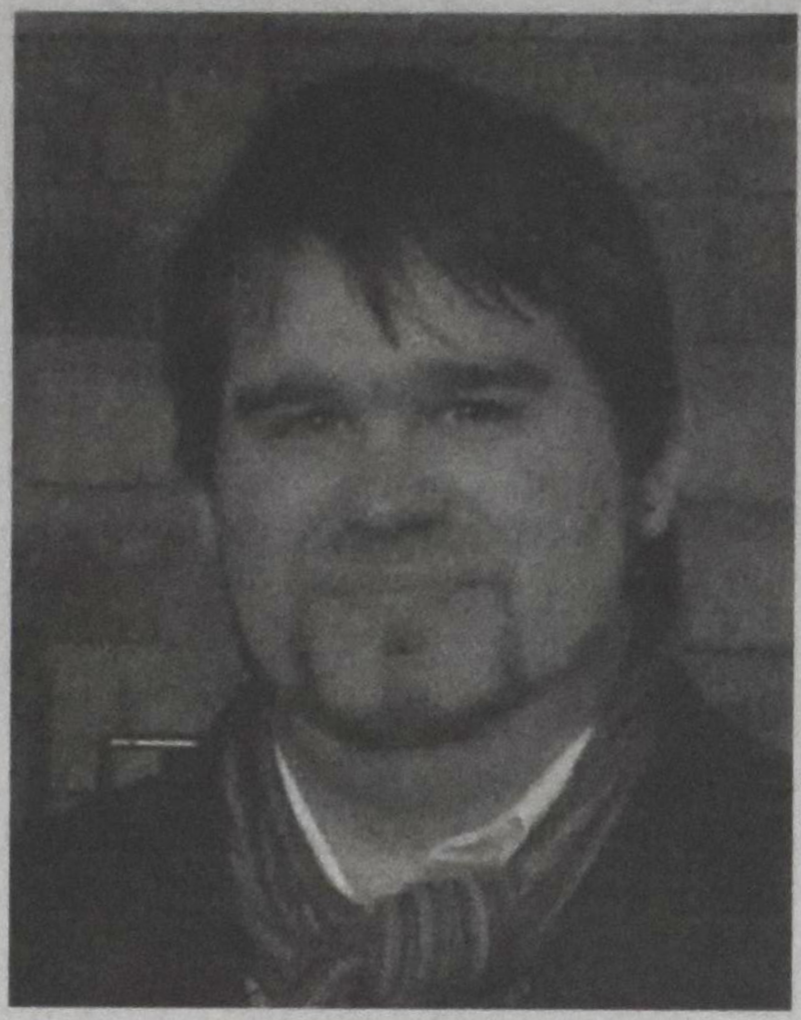
ST. CATHARINES, Ontario – The Board of Reformed Faith Witness is extremely happy and grateful to announce the appointment of three part-time editors for the *Christian Courier*. Beginning January 1, Angela Reitsma Bick and Brett Alan Dewing will assume their duties as co-editors, along with Bert Witvoet, currently the acting editor. The three journalists hope to take the *Christian Courier* into a new phase that will reach out to the younger generation without losing sight of the generation that has faithfully supported the paper for many years.

Both Angela and Brett are graduates of Redeemer University College in Ancaster, Ontario. Angela graduated from Redeemer in 2001 with a Bachelor of Arts (Honours English), and from Queen's University in 2004 with a Master of Arts in English. Brett graduated from Redeemer in 2003 with an Honours BA in Theatre and English. He spent the following year at Brock University taking pre-service education in Intermediate/Senior Dramatic Arts and English. Both have experience working in a foreign country.

Angela has worked extensively as an editor and, for the past year and a half, has written a column entitled "Eating my words" for the *Christian Courier*. She has been a part-time lecturer in English and the director of the Writing Centre at Redeemer and currently functions as adjunct English professor there. Angela grew up in the Reformed community and heartily embraces its teachings and perspective. She lives in Barrie, Ontario with her husband Allan Bick and their two children Robin and Alba.

Brett is an American Christian who came into the Reformed community by studying at Redeemer. He feels a strong affinity with Canada. His passion is writing and Theatre. He has taught in Taiwan and Canada, and has worked with Brookstone Performing Arts in Toronto. He has published poetry and given workshops in literature and drama. He lives in Warren Center, Pennsylvania. Brett loves the Reformed perspective and is excited about taking part in the journalistic venture called *Christian Courier.*

Bert Witvoet needs little introduction to the readership of *Christian Courier.* He was its editor from 1982 to 1999. Since his retirement from CC, he has been the editor of the *Christian Educators Journal,* published out of Grand Rapids, Michigan, for 10 years. Bert intends to resign from that position in May of 2009. He sees his role at CC as a one-year voluntary one to help with the transition and to be inspired by the fact that a new generation is taking up the challenge of providing Christians in Canada and the United States with a vision that proclaims the sovereign and merciful reign of Christ over all of creation.



Language bridges

These are exciting times. In 2009, *Christian Courier* enters a new era. It is a time of broadening our reach to engage the emerging leaders of tomorrow's Reformed community. It is a time of fresh thought and fresh voices joining hands with experience and wisdom to not only bring you a paper devoted to the Spirit's work in our world and Church but also to serve as a model of that Body in these changing times. It is my passion to use language as a way of bridging the divisive generation gaps in society in order to unitedly reach out to our lost and suffering world. That bridge begins here. The time is always now. Let's use it the best we can.

Brett Alan Dewing

Stories connect

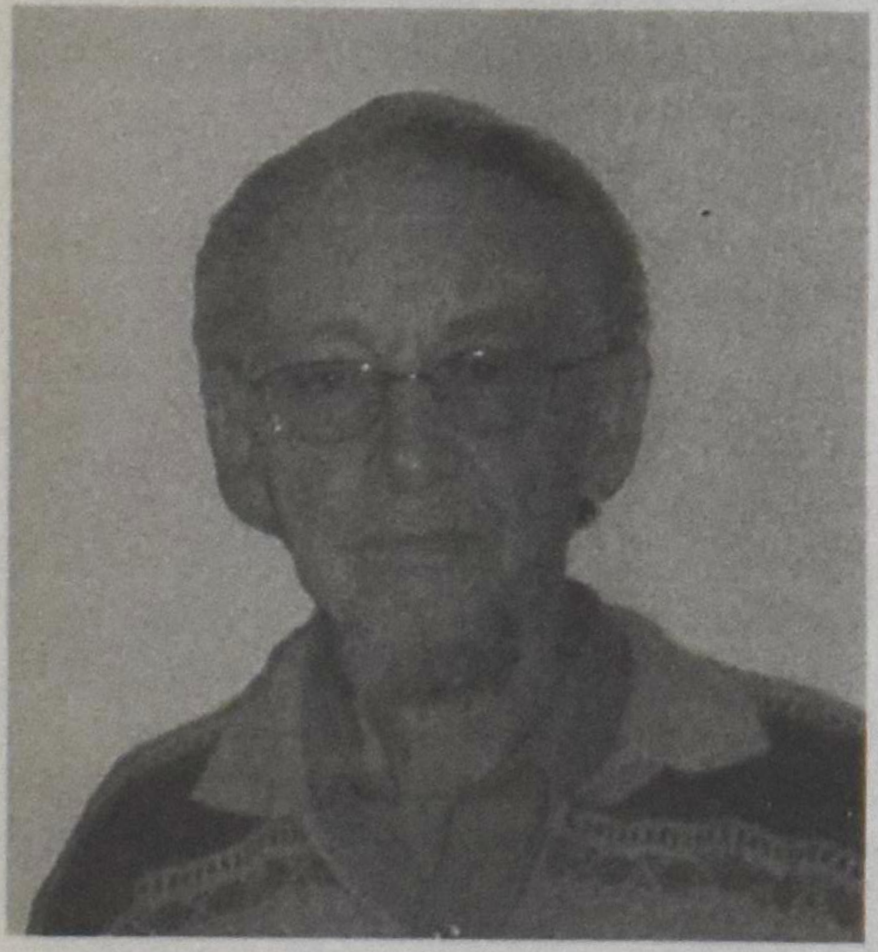
I'm a sucker for stories. A stall at last summer's Arts Festival, for example, displayed dozens of beautiful, hand-crafted wooden spoons. How to choose? I was stumped, until the artist pointed out a mahogany one. After Hurricane Katrina, he was part of a clean-up crew, removing fallen trees. He was astonished to find a mahogany tree, rare in this part of the world. He salvaged the wood and made this spoon. It was a sale, and now that bit of history sits in my kitchen drawer.

There is no lack of information in the world today; on the contrary, we are drowning in it. We have instant access to more news than it's possible to absorb. But stories connect people, and it is through story that we make sense of things. The *Christian Courier,* then, is a place to share stories of faithful living with each other and to grapple with the major events of our times.

My vision for *CC* is one that expands on its original mission; now, instead of providing the only *contact* with others in the Christian Reformed community, *CC* offers a Reformed *context* for current events. Furthermore, stories connect people of all ages, so I'm hopeful that the subscribers to *CC* will soon include younger readers. After all, if that wooden spoon is any indication, stories sell.

Angela Reitsma Bick

From the editor's desk



Dear readers,

It goes without saying that I am extremely happy about developments here at *Christian Courier*. It appears that the Lord is giving us a new opportunity to continue his work in Christian journalism. We have clearly seen God's hand in a number of instances, including unexpected donations to Reformed Faith Witness.

There have been times that I wondered whether the younger generation is picking up the torch from their parents and whether they are passionate about the task of trying to discern the spirits that shape our society and culture. Do they understand the importance of telling the story of life from a point of view that seeks first the Kingdom of Heaven? Will they even bother with the Christian media?

Today, with the appointment of two young editors to our paper, I am hopeful again. And I thank God for Christian schools who carry the message of cultural awareness and renewal and who produce young men and women who are able to adapt to the post-modern culture of Generation X what we brought in previous times to our generation.

At this time, I would like to urge our current subscribers to help us reach younger readers by either giving them a gift subscription to *Christian Courier* or encouraging at least one or two to subscribe themselves. I look upon this time as a unique window of opportunity to see in action the prophecy of Joel 2: "Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions." One thing is clear: this old man is dreaming dreams. At age 74, I accept this new challenge of being a courier of the Good News. Please join Angela, Brett and myself in seeing visions and dreaming about the continuation of God's beautiful work of Christian journalism.

Bert Witvoet

Please see page 19 for more information about a gift subscription.

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Letters

Without C.C. you can't keep up-to-date

I still subscribe to C.C.; in fact, I must have ever since arriving in Canada some fifty plus years ago. I felt deeply saddened by the passing of Harry der Nederlanden. I knew him rather well, and his parents even better. I arrived in Edmonton, or should I say, in Beverly, where the der Nederlanden family was living. So if nothing else, we had at least this much in common – we both knew a lot of people there.

Harry, in his writings, never made a secret of his illness, and I guess over time I began to realize that it would be terminal. I talked with him this past February when my subscription was due. I was not planning to renew it at that time, especially since we live in Florida during the winter months. Sometimes some issues arrive there two weeks or more late. So I called Harry. We had a very nice chat, and, after that, I could not quite bring myself to cancel. And now I'm glad I didn't. I talked with him once more when I read that Harry most likely would not live until Christmas. I really felt embarrassed when I called to see how he was doing some time later, and Rose answered the phone, only to hear that he had passed away the day before. Regretfully I was unable to attend his funeral, but did listen to your eulogy.

I appreciated your "Whither C.C.?" article in the November 22 issue. Many people must have wondered, as I did, if the passing of Harry would be the end for C.C. Your editorial on Barack Obama was well thought out, so much so, in fact, that I plan to keep it for a close friend of mine who lives in Bradenton Florida. He is an exceptionally gifted Sunday school teacher – a Republican, of course, but well educated. His father, an ordained pastor, started the Baptist church where we worship in the morning. But I know he will like what you wrote in that article.

Someone I know was reading my copy of C.C., and I asked him if he was a subscriber. The answer was negative. I said to him: "I'm surprised. You are a member of the Christian Reformed Church, and you even serve as an elder. I find it sad that so many members of the reformed faith are like you and do not subscribe to it. But what's more, whenever you and I are talking about church matters, I find that you are not nearly as up-to-date as I think you ought to be. This paper at least will remedy that, as it will give you a wealth of info about what's happening in reformed circles, and also about other churches, even globally." He agreed. I hope he will become a new subscriber.

Jack Terpstra,
Mount Hope, Ontario

Stump time around Christmas

My window seat
Mendelt Hoekstra

"A shoot will come up from the stump..." Isaiah 11 vs.1a

I've always found Christmas to be a polarizing time. Reuniting with loved ones is rightfully treasured and emphasized, but will those without family be brought in and comforted?

At my work for Bethesda, an organization that supports adults with developmental disabilities, I encounter many individuals who have a difficult time at Christmas. These individuals have a difficult time because they don't have nuclear or extended families who will take them in, and so they have to wade through the Christmas season by themselves while others often speak about and cherish family gatherings.

Christmas is a time when local Food Banks are used more often than at other times of the year, when Canada Post is the busiest with mailings, cards and gifts, and when people plan to give to others so that the love of Christ may be tangibly felt.

It is a time to celebrate the birth of our Christ. It is a time when the shoot that was proclaimed in Isaiah comes to fruition.

It is also a time that some of us will heavily miss our loved ones. It will be the first Christmas for the der Nederlanden family without their dear father and husband, Harry. It will be a time when some of us will remember those who left us long ago. It will be a time for some to look forward and hope for a blessed new year. It will be a time to look back and experience thankfulness for the blessings received.

For some it will be a wonderful time. For others it will be a difficult time.

For us, Christmas will be all of that and more. We will have wonderful days and we will have difficult days. And we will have wonderfully difficult days. I can't explain the difference between a wonderful and difficult day except that I know for certain that they do exist simultaneously.

Entering the first anniversary of my wife Marisa's death from cancer at age 33, our three children and I will again be wading through emotionally difficult territory. I often wonder how we are to effectively take the past, wrap it up, hold and honour it and continue on. The past is like a stump for us — painfully cut down but in need of harvest. We need to continue to seek wisdom and understanding so we can see the shoots that either have come or will come to us.

Christmas is like that. The actual event of Jesus' birth is nothing unless we know the past and future meaning of it. What would Christmas mean if it wasn't foretold or if it wasn't planned for a sovereign purpose?

Myself and our three children ages 2, 4 and 6 are no different from many other families. We are experiencing what I call our "stump time." We are like many others, people who are living with suffering and joy. Many people will offer advice and try and provide comfort. Some of it will work. Some of it will not work. Some people will tell you that your faith will bring you through it and will quote a piece of Scripture to prove that. Sometimes that helps and can make one feel better. But the truth is that sometimes it doesn't work.

For some this Christmas will be a time when despair and hurt need to be acknowledged, but they should also be reminded that during their "stump time" a shoot will come forth.

That is the promise from the manger. I wish you a blessed and peaceful Christmas.

Mendelt D. Hoekstra is the founder and director of the Music Therapy program at Bethesda, an organization owned and operated by the Mennonite Brethren Conference of Ontario, that supports adults with developmental possibilities. He lives in Vineland, ON with his three children.

The proof is in the records

Mr. Beekhuis opens his comments (Letters, Nov. 10) with a reference to my "far-right, American conservative view of the world." My students would be amused as some have viewed me as a Dutch socialist over the years. To analyze Obama's socialist ideology is not to cut off debate, but to encourage full and open discussion. A prudent voter cannot be satisfied with a blank promise of "hope and change." For me, party platforms are important documents that provide voters with direction signposts. They also give a glimpse into the political ideology/philosophy of each candidate.

Mr. Beekhuis and I agree on the importance of faith in Obama's life and I, too, appreciate Obama's challenge to black fathers. Unlike Mr. Beekhuis, who maintains "that Obama's faith is genuine and sincere," I cannot read Obama's heart. I can evaluate only on the basis of what he has written. For the record, Obama stated (March, 27, 2008) that one does not need Jesus to get to heaven.

Reflecting on his religious experiences, Obama recalls that in "our household the Bible, the Koran, and the Bhagavad Gita sat on the shelf alongside books of Greek and Norse and African mythology." He grew up in "a country that easily blended its Islamic faith with remnants of Hinduism, Buddhism, and ancient animist traditions." (*The Audacity of Hope, AH*,203, 204)

Unlike most liberal democrats, Obama takes religion seriously. He was attracted to his church in Chicago by its involvement in community organizing and its teaching of "collective salvation." (*AH,207*) Obama sat under the preaching of his pastor for twenty years, years in which he was steeped in a black liberation theology, which is not a typical American social gospel. Obama is a man of many religious traditions but of one ideology. His presidency may be faith-based, but his fundamentalist faith is in global humanism.

Obama presented himself as a non-ideological candidate. In my article, I demonstrated that his ideas about fundamental change have roots in the socialist ideology of former socialist prime ministers Brandt and Palme. Obama applies these ideological principles in the new context of globalization and "building just, secure, democratic societies." Has Mr. Beekhuis forgotten the principled distinction between the liberal idea of **political** democracy and the socialist ideal of **economic** democracy? I would suggest that it is "tortured" ideology – not logic — that tries to make a direct link between global poverty and international security

The "right" is taken to task for equating "the US with the Kingdom of God," but few voices are raised when the "left" issues a voter's guide entitled: "Voting God's Politics." Canada and the USA were founded under God's Providence – not as "the promised land" but as lands of promise. Beekhuis may be surprised to know that a recent international poll found that 25 percent of Canadians would consider moving to America. I am concerned with the increasing secularization of our countries and the growing restrictions on the free expression of Christian beliefs.

In the 1950s, when my wife was a public school teacher, Bible reading was still required in Ontario's public schools. When I worked on Parliament Hill, daily sessions officially opened with a prayerful statement: "May Divine Providence guide our deliberations." The final sentence in my book, *Trudeau's Canada: Truth and Consequences* (1977), is even more relevant today: "A national regeneration of our Christian roots is required, lest we lament the degeneration of a nation."

Eight years from now, history will have been written and everyone will know whether or not my analysis was accurate. It would give me great satisfaction to acknowledge my error, to admit that an Obama administration did not advance socialist agendas and did not move towards more one-world power structures.

Philip C. Bom,
Virginia Beach, Virginia.

There is a time to keep and a time to throw away

Maynard van der Galien

Many of us at some stage in our life received a memorable award for being the best in a particular field, or for long service. It could be a plaque, a certificate you've framed, a trophy, ribbons, whatever.

You've been really proud of the award and had it on display in your house or office. Maybe it was up for a few years. Now it's in a drawer along with other memorabilia you're tired of looking at. It probably doesn't mean the same as when you first got it.

What things should you keep and what things should you throw out? Some folks hoard all kinds of old stuff. Everything is a treasure to them, or they think it could become a treasure. Others like to keep their storage room, basement, attic neat and tidy.

Whatever the case, we all accumulate a lot of stuff in our lifetime. Some are treasures. Those framed certificates, plaques or trophies you've accumulated over the years can't be passed onto the next generation. They don't want them.

The writer of the Old Testament Book of Ecclesiastes says there is a time to keep and a time to throw away. We all know that.

A recent *Today* devotional says: "We can better understand that word of wisdom in the light of the stages of life. For all of us, there is an accumulation phase. Young adults, just establishing a home, are often amazed by how many things they need to run out and buy! But older adults often find that they have moved to a divesting stage, when things that hold meaning are lovingly passed on to their children, grandchildren, or friends."

That's not always the case. Some years ago I attended a dinner honoring three dedicated farmers from the past. At the end of the evening I overheard one man ask his brother, "What do we do with all this stuff? Who wants it?" They were talking about the awards.

The federal and provincial governments gave certificates. The plaque was from the organization sponsoring the event. Who wanted them? Where should they go? The father was from another generation. He was a good farmer and a community-minded man.

While the man's children, who were all up in years, were proud of their father being honored, they didn't know what to do with the awards. They knew their children and grandchildren had no interest in the items.

Last summer Mae (now my wife) and I were at an outdoor house warming party for the son of friends of ours in Brockville. We enjoyed the pig roast and potluck supper. It was an interesting evening. What astonished me most were the tall trophies the lad had sitting on his kitchen counter. The young man spends his summer weekends having fun mud racing – you know, racing trucks through mud. The half dozen trophies he had sitting on the counter were at least 18-inches tall. They were all from placing first. I was impressed when I saw the trophies, thinking they were for something really important – you know such expensive looking things. I groaned when I saw what they were for.

The lad's mother said if he ever gets married the dust gathering eye-sores will probably be the first to go – off the counter and into storage.

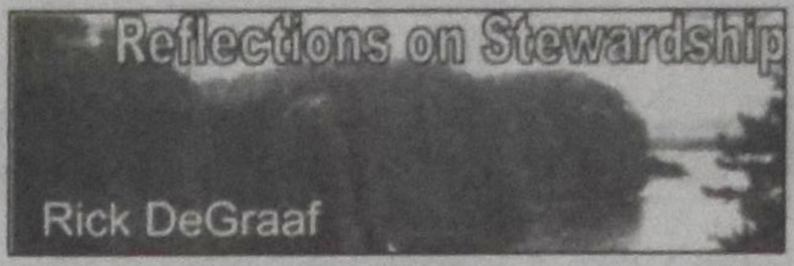
I'm sure there are many useless trophies sitting around gathering dust. Why don't organizers give something more practical or useful, such as money, gift certificates, tickets to an event, engraved silver trays or glassware, for example.

Recently, I've been pondering about something. In 1961, at the age of 12, I started writing a daybook. For 47 years I've been writing a line or two each day in large lined notebooks. They are tucked away in a bottom drawer.

Who cares what I did on a hot July day in 1961? Who cares that the first snow covering the ground in the autumn of 1961 fell on November 20. Christmas Day in 1961 was sunny and nice with light snow on the ground.

Like the writer of Ecclesiastes says…there is a time to keep and a time to throw out. I'm not throwing the notebooks out yet. I'm not going to record any more useless information – starting January 1, 2009.

Maynard van der Galien farms at Renfrew, Ontario. He likes his Dutch name Meindert better. He was born in Holland. But Canadians have a hard time pronouncing it. (maynard@renfrew.net)



Year-end "Wrap-up"

As 2008 draws to a close, it is once again prime time to consider our year-end charitable gifts. The increased volume of charitable-giving requests by mail or telephone serves to remind us of that as well since many agencies know that this is the best "harvest" time for charitable giving. Your accountant may also indicate that this is a good time to consider a charitable gift or an addition to your RRSP – as the time interval between the gift and the return through reduced income tax is the shortest for last-minute giving.

For some there is not much choice, since by the nature of their business, year-end giving is the norm. This is the case for many farmers who are just finishing their harvest in the fall and are still engaged in marketing their crops. Other business people simply like to be close to the calendar year-end before they commit to their final giving for the year, as their business success should determine the size of the gift in keeping with a biblical tithing principle.

Whatever your reason – now is the time to get that last minute gift taken care of.

However, I would hope that last-minute giving it is not your primary way of giving. Last-minute giving tends to have a knee-jerk or reactive nature – it's vulnerable to emotions and, therefore, less planned. Instead, you might consider Abel and his approach to giving and worship (Gen. 4). Our giving is to be planned, a "first fruit" gift that comes out of a desire to give God our best. The exercise of reviewing, reflecting and re-committing as reviewed in the last two columns serves to help us practice a "Kingdom-first" and planned approach to giving. Last minute giving seems to reflect a left-over kind of thinking. While it is a good habit to make a last minute self-check on annual giving, last-minute giving should not be a primary pattern, unless of course it is part of your annual giving plan – given the nature of your income sources.

Although the RRSP season doesn't close yet, it also seems prudent to plan for any last minute contributions you may want to consider reviewing your giving and your RRSP contributions together to reduce your tax burden. A trial income-tax projection will help you determine what might be the best income-tax saving strategy for you. It may be a good thing to consult with your financial advisor before the year end.

The time is now – before the year ends. Take advantage of the allowances that our Government permits for charitable giving and contributions to RRSPs. Your gift could not only reduce your income tax liability, but, more importantly, it can serve some aspect of God's great Kingdom enterprise. Consider a Christian mission or charity that is close to your heart – and give!

***Stewardly Tip*: Procrastination:** the things we don't like to do are usually the things we procrastinate on. If you found yourself doing too much last-minute giving—act on it by developing a plan for 2009. Take advantage of Pre-Authorized Remittances that are available to facilitate regular giving for most churches and charities. They save a lot of cheque writing and remembering. It works best if you set aside an annual review date each year to decide upon your giving goals.

Readers: Share your "Stewardly Tips' so that we all can make better use of the resources God has entrusted to us. Submit your suggestions (by mail to *Christian Courier* or by email to my address below) and provide your contact information so that we can acknowledge your contribution or ask you for more details.

Next issue: God's Gift

Rick DeGraaf works for Christian Stewardship Services in Markham, Ontario. Rick's email: rckd@csservices.ca

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'David and Goliath' city found in Israel?

Marian Van Til, with files from *National Geographic*

TEL AVIV, Israel – The remains of an ancient gate mark the location of the biblical city Sha'arayim, say archaeologists working in Israel. The city is significant because young David, Israel's future king, battled Goliath in the Elah Valley near Sha'arayim.

"Sha'arayim" means "two gates in Hebrew, says archaeologist Yosef Garfinkel of Hebrew University. One fortified gate was found earlier and now a second has been found at the Elah Fortress, which Garfinkel says proves the existence of Sha'arayim. "All the sites from this period uncovered so far had only one gate. We have two gates and this is very unusual," he says.

Aerial view of the Elah Fortress

The recently found gate is made of stone and weighs as much as ten tons. It was found on the site's eastern side, facing Jerusalem. It is the second recent find to be made at the Elah Fortress, which is near the present-day city of Bet Shemesh.

In October, Garfinkel announced the finding of a 3,000-year-old pottery shard which contains text that he and other archaeologists say is Hebrew. The shard was hailed as the most important archaeological discovery in Israel since the Dead Sea Scrolls, but it has escaped the media hype that followed the revelation of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Initial carbon-14 dating of olive pits found at the site, as well as analysis of other pottery remains, concluded the text shard was created between 1000 and 975 B.C. – the time David lived.

Garfinkel believes the discovery provides additional evidence that the fortified city (Sha'arayim) was part of a centralized governmental system administered by David when he was King. The fortress is the first site found from the Iron Age in what was once territory controlled by David.

Sha'arayim is mentioned three times in the Bible and is twice linked to David, Garfinkel says. "Everything comes together – the geography, the Bible, and the radiometric dating. It's no coincidence."

Really one of David's cities?

Several other archaeologists received news of the second gate's discovery with great interest but were skeptical of Garfinkel's conclusions. Amos Kloner, an Israel-studies professor at Bar Ilan University, once served as district archaeologist around the Elah site but is not involved in the current excavations. "This is an initial idea, all aspects of which must be examined," he says. It "doesn't matter if there is a second gate" because the gate itself gives no indication of a Judean population there, he concluded. It is not known whether the Israelites or the Philistines controlled the strategic fortress overlooking the Elah Valley.

Garfinkel, however, believes the site was most likely the westernmost outpost maintained by the Kingdom of Judah, which controlled land in southwest Asia and Palestine and was a predecessor to the Kingdom of Israel.

Israel Knohl, also not involved in the Elah excavations, is a biblical studies professoer at Hebrew University of Jerusalem. "The main problem with this site is that we still need unequivocal proof that it was a city of Judeans," he says. Knohl believes that the discovery of the second gate does not prove "with certainty" that the fortified city discovered was Sha'arayim.

The main hints about what life was like in the area come from the Old Testament. But "if you ask me what life was like even in Jerusalem during the time of King David, that we can't say ... we simply don't know," Knohl says.

Meanwhile, Garfinkel says he will continue to explore the Elah site in search of further evidence. "Maybe we'll find an inscription on the gate indicating who built the city: 'I David, son of Yishai [Jesse], built this city,'" he concluded with a laugh.

Hindu temple priest gets a second chance

UTTAR PRADESH, India (GFA) – Listening to the missionaries pray, Gandharu Sahu felt a range of emotions. As a Hindu temple priest in his village in Uttar Pradesh, India, Gandharu adhered closely to the established traditions and was devoted to that way of life. So when Gospel for Asia film team members Ravinder Singh and Parkash Sirvastava visited his village late last year to show a movie on the life of Jesus, he drove them away with stern protests.

Some months passed. Even knowing they could face Gandharu's wrath, the missionaries returned to this area which is part of the most populous state in India, inhabited by over 150 million people representing a mix of groups, languages and religions.

This time, things were very different. Gandharu did not protest the showing; instead, he came out to watch the film himself. And large crowd from the village joined him.

When the movie was over, the two missionaries prayed for audience members. Gandharu says he was amazed at the release he felt in his heart as the missionaries prayed. He knew he had to tell everyone what he was experiencing, so he walked forward and addressed the crowd.

"I was suffering with a lot of pain and tension and was under the bondage of darkness for many years," the priest told them. "But when these brothers prayed, I felt great peace and joy filling my heart. And now I'm a freed man."

The next Sunday, Gandharu visited the local church and testified as to how God was working in his life. He walked away from his duties as temple priest and gave his heart to Christ.

Today Gandharu is eternally glad for two missionaries who refused to give up.

Gospel for Asia sponsors the two missionaries, hundreds of other indigenous missionaries, and provides education and training for them. GFA requests that Christians worldwide for their prayers for Gandharu and thousands of people like him who are being confronted with the Gospel. GFA asks, "Pray that he will grow daily in Christ and that he will be a willing instrument God can use to share His love in the village. Pray, too, for continued boldness for [missionaries] Ravinder and Parkash as they reach out in Jesus' name through film."

CRC-supported Metis Fellowship hosts native Christmas paintings

Chris Meehan, CRC Communications

REGINA, SK – Various aboriginal images and symbols surround the figure of Mary cradling the Christ child in the Woodland Cree-style painting that was recently part of an exhibit of seventeen paintings at the Indian Metis Christian Fellowship (IMCF), a Christian Reformed Church in North America-supported center in Regina.

Called *Kisê-manitow Omiyikowiswin* or *The Creator's Gift*, the series depicting the Christmas story was created by Ovide Bighetty, a self-taught artist originally from the Pukatawagan First Nations in northern Manitoba. The exhibit ran for two days at the center (Nov. 14-15) before moving for a longer stay at nearby Sonlight Christian Reformed Church.

"All of these paintings were taken from the Christmas story of when Jesus was born," said Bighetty in a phone interview. Each painting comes from a particular passage of Scripture. "The first one shows when the angel visits Mary, telling her she'll conceive. Each painting tells a different part of the story from the Luke and Matthew texts," says the artist.

Range of symbols

Although his work distinctly follows the biblical stories of the Savior's birth, says Bighetty, each painting also uses a range of native symbols, from figures of people and animals to scenes of the outdoors, that are painted in a particular style. It is a style he learned by studying the work of Norval Morrisseau, an Ojibwe artist and founder of the Woodland school, also known as Legend or Medicine painting.

Some of the images in the paintings in the new series come from native lore while others he imagined himself as he contemplated the verses in the Bible. "I hope the story comes across in a certain visual way," he said.

Bighetty has done work for IMCF before. In January 2002, Bert Adema, IMCF Director, commissioned Bighetty to create a series of images depicting the Easter Story. He painted *Kisemanito Pakitinasuwin – The Creator's Sacrifice* in acrylic on canvas encased in a cedar frame.

In 2006, Bighetty was commissioned to create twelve pieces illustrating the teachings known as "Steps Along the Red Road Following Christ the Creator." For each image, says Adema, "Ovide selected an eagle feather to emphasize the sacred aboriginal spirituality of the teachings. The images, the feathers, and the teachings are integrated in shadow boxes constructed of birch, Plexiglas, and Baltic birch plywood."

Last year, Adema commissioned the artist to do the series of paintings on the Christmas story. Bighetty says he needed to consult with elders and members of the community to get a clear focus for his paintings before coming up with sketches. Once the series was narrowed to seventeen paintings, he worked on them at a table in his house from about 8 a.m. until midnight almost every day for four months.

"I worked on them steady. It was fun doing them," he says. "I hope the people get the message and enjoy the paintings."

A traditional teaching among the First Nations of Turtle Island, says Adema, is that before Europeans crossed the ocean, native elders had visions of people coming from the east with messages from the Creator.

"This ancient tradition resonates with the mandate of Indian Metis Christian Fellowship to encourage aboriginal people to claim, develop, use, and celebrate the individual and cultural gifts they have received from the Creator," says Adema. "The tradition and the mandate provided the inspiration for IMCF's commissioning of Ovide Bighetty to create three unique series of paintings."

The Pope agrees – mostly – with Luther's view of justification

VATICAN CITY (Zenit.org) – A few weeks after Lutherans and Calvinists celebrated the 491st anniversary of the start of the Reformation this year, Pope Benedict XVI told a group of listeners at the Vatican that Martin Luther's doctrine on justification is correct.The Pope was speaking during one of his ongoing general audiences dedicated to reflections on St. Paul, and was considering the Apostle's teaching on justification.

Benedict noted that Paul's conversion experience on the road to Damascus "changed his life radically: he began to regard all his merits, achievements of a most honest religious career, as 'loss' in face of the sublimity of knowledge of Jesus Christ."

"It is precisely because of this personal experience of the relationship with Jesus that Paul places at the center of his Gospel an irreducible opposition between two alternative paths to justice: one based on the works of the law, the other founded on the grace of faith in Christ," Benedict said. "The alternative between justice through the works of the law and justice through faith in Christ thus becomes one of the dominant themes that runs through his letters."

What is 'law'?

But in order to understand this Pauline teaching, Benedict XVI asserted, "we must clarify what is the 'law' from which we have been freed and what are those 'works of the law' that do not justify."

He explained, "Already in the community of Corinth there was the opinion, which will return many times in history, which consisted in thinking that it was a question of the moral law, and that Christian freedom consisted therefore in being free from ethics. [...] It is obvious that this interpretation is erroneous: Christian liberty is not libertinism; the freedom of which St. Paul speaks is not freedom from doing good."

Instead, Benedict said, the law to which Paul refers is the "collection of behaviors extending from an ethical foundation to the ritual and cultural observances that substantially determined the identity of the just man – particularly circumcision, the observance regarding pure food and general ritual purity, the rules regarding observance of the Sabbath, etc." These observances served to protect Jewish identity and faith in God; they were "a defense shield that would protect the precious inheritance of the faith," Benedict remarked.

But at the moment of Paul's encounter with Christ, the Apostle "understood that with Christ's resurrection the situation had changed radically. The wall – so says the Letter to the Ephesians – between Israel and the pagans was no longer necessary. It is Christ who protects us against polytheism and all its deviations; it is Christ who unites us with and in the one God; it is Christ who guarantees our true identity in the diversity of cultures; and it is he who makes us just. To be just means simply to be with Christ and in Christ. And this suffices. Other observances are no longer necessary," the Pope said.

And it is because of this that Luther's expression "by faith alone" is true as long as "faith is not opposed to charity, to love," said Benedict. "Faith is to look at Christ, to entrust oneself to Christ, to be united to Christ, to be conformed to Christ, to his life. And the form, the life of Christ, is love; hence, to believe is to be conformed to Christ and to enter into his love." "Paul knows," the Pope concluded, "that in the double love of God and neighbor the whole law is fulfilled. Thus the whole law is observed in communion with Christ, in faith that creates charity. We are just when we enter into communion with Christ, who is love."

Australians asked to evaluate freedom of religion in their country

Marian Van Til, with files from Ekklesia

SYDNEY, Australia – Australians are being asked to engage in a public discussion about the state of freedom of religion in their country. The discussion and evaluation is being urged by the Australian Human Rights Commission. The commission was established in 1986 by an act of the federal Parliament. It is an independent statutory organization that reports to Australia's federal Parliament through the Attorney General.

Tom Calma

Until the end of January the commission will be gathering information to be included in a discussion paper called "Freedom of Religion and Belief in the 21st Century." Australian Race Discrimination Commissioner Tom Calma has urged as many Australians as possible to become involved in the discussion, which he launched in early September of this year.

Calma notes that "freedom of religion and belief" is a fundamental human right that "encompasses freedom of thought on all matters and the freedom to demonstrate and express our religion and belief individually, with others, in private or in public." It is a right "protected by a number of international treaties and declarations."

The intent of the public discussion about religion, said, Calma, is "to examine and report upon the extent to which this right can be enjoyed in Australia today by drawing from practical everyday experiences and observations." He noted that "this is easy for some, while others feel religion and human rights don't mix, like oil and water."

Plenty of every-day examples

In calling for submissions from the public, Calma reminded Australians that the intersection of religion and belief with human rights is illustrated daily in news headlines.

"The involvement of religious institutions in school curriculums and practices, religious and ethical concerns about scientific research, the status of Muslim communities in society since the events of September 11, 2001, the involvement of religion in debates about homosexuality or abortion, and our politicians declaring their faith on the campaign trail – these are just some of the stories that involve us every day at the intersection of religion and belief with human rights," said Commissioner Calma.

"Given that these issues are continually in the headlines, it is timely that they be comprehensively evaluated in terms of their impacts on the practice, expression and perception of religion and spirituality in Australia," said Calma. "A better understanding of these issues and the way they influence, and are influenced by, our attitudes and laws will assist us as to advance our nation's social and cultural prosperity."

Commissioner Calma emphasized that gaining a comprehensive understanding of these issues cannot be done merely by consulting with academics, religious institutions and government. That's why "we need to hear from as many people as possible, from as many walks of life, with as many different experiences to share as we can," he said.

Israeli settlers attack Palestinian shepherds and Christian peacemakers

HAVAT MA'ON (Ekklesia) – Fifteen masked Israeli settlers from the illegal outpost of Havat Ma'on attacked three Palestinian shepherds who were grazing their flocks in a valley south of the outpost, and the Christian peacemakers who were with them. The attack took place Nov. 15.

The settlers ran down from a ridge above the shepherds, hurling rocks. The shepherds were able to get their flocks away before the rocks injured them, but two of their donkeys were stolen. The settlers killed one donkey by knifing it in the chest, and slashed another across the throat, but the second donkey survived.

Settlers also hit two internationals from Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT), who were accompanying the shepherd, with large rocks. One CPTer sustained minor injuries. Much of CPT's work involves "getting in the way" and seeking to protect people from violence without using violence themselves. CPT seeks to "enlist churches in organized, nonviolent alternatives to war and places teams of trained peacemakers in regions of lethal conflict."

The Israeli police were called four times before responding to the incident. They did not initially respond to reports of settlers attacking Palestinian shepherds and internationals, but responded when they learned of the attack on the donkeys.

The assault occurred on land the shepherds graze daily and which the settlers hope to take for the expansion of Havat Ma'on. Replacing the donkey will cost around $300 Cdn.

CPT says the Israeli occupation has impoverished the shepherds of the area, making them dependent on outside food aid.

CPT was founded in 1984. Today it places violence-reduction teams in crisis situations and militarized areas around the world at the invitation of local peace and human rights workers. CPT describes itself as "embrac[ing] the vision of unarmed intervention waged by committed peacemakers ready to risk injury and death in bold attempts to transform lethal conflict through the nonviolent power of God's truth and love.

Initiated by Mennonites, Brethren and Quakers with broad ecumenical participation, CPT's ministry of biblically-based and spiritually-centered peacemaking emphasizes "creative public witness, nonviolent direct action and protection of human rights."

Blood of the slaughtered donkey leaves unsettling evidence of the attack.

Sights and sounds of my life – Part II

Canadian Brenncarriers on streets of Holland

Carl Tuyl

This week the author concludes the story of his war-time experiences.

Now come with me to a whole different series of sights – sights of events that occurred when I was still a prisoner. Last year my companion and I made a pilgrimage to the beaches of Normandy where the allied troops landed on that fateful day in June 1944. There is at the most southern landing site a steep cliff almost two hundred meters high. Two companies of Rangers – that is about 250 men – made, I don't know how, their way up that cliff, and 90 of them survived the climb. About an hour's drive north is Juno beach where the Canadians landed. A tank made it up the beach about one hundred feet. Then it was hit by a *Panzerfaust*. The tank was destroyed and the men in it killed. That tank still stands there, and people still put fresh flowers on it every day.

We visited all the beaches where the Allied troops landed on that significant day. Unforgettable, too, is the sight of the war cemeteries along the coast. Let me just mention to you one of those cemeteries. It is close to what was called Omaha beach but is now called The Garden of the Missing. The cemetery contains a semi-circular wall that displays the names of 1557 missing soldiers. These are the young men who gave their lives but whose remains have not been recovered of positively identified. Among them the names of twin brothers. Also all through the cemetery are tombstones of soldiers with the inscription "Known to God." At the German cemetery similar tombstones read: *"Ein unbekanter Soldat."*

Silent sounds

It is there on the beaches of Normandy that the fierce battles started that brought freedom to me and my contemporaries. But the long rows of white tombstones from Normandy all the way up North, into the Netherlands, soundlessly wail the silent language of the terror and the agony of war. Let me tell you how I met some of the soldiers that fought from Normandy all the north to Holland.

To do that, I make quite a jump in time to the spring of 1945. I was back in the village where I had been in hiding before my arrest. How I got back there is a story that, if told, would take perhaps the better part of my day. Let me just say that I was back. I slept at night with four other guys in a make-shift hut way back in a large orchard. We all stood watch for two hours, and, when German trucks approached, we would flee deep into a nearby field of corn. This one night I stood watch and heard this strange sound in the distance. I could hear that it wasn't a truck, but I did not trust it and so I woke my companions. We were about to head for the cornfield when we could see the vehicle that rumbled toward us. It was a Canadian Brenncarrier. There were three of them. It was a scouting group which came to check out the village.

Suddenly the whole village woke up. People who had not been seen for years appeared in the street, and, even though it was way after midnight, some people put the red white and blue Dutch flag on their house. There is no way I could even begin to describe the exuberance of those moments. People felt free after five long years of German occupation and terror. Alas the three vehicles and their occupants were, as I said, on a scouting mission and they left before dawn. The Germans came back the next few days and even searched again for people in houses and barns. I hid those few days under a low glass cover in which a farmer grew lettuce. Less than a week later the Germans withdrew and we were free.

A fierce fight

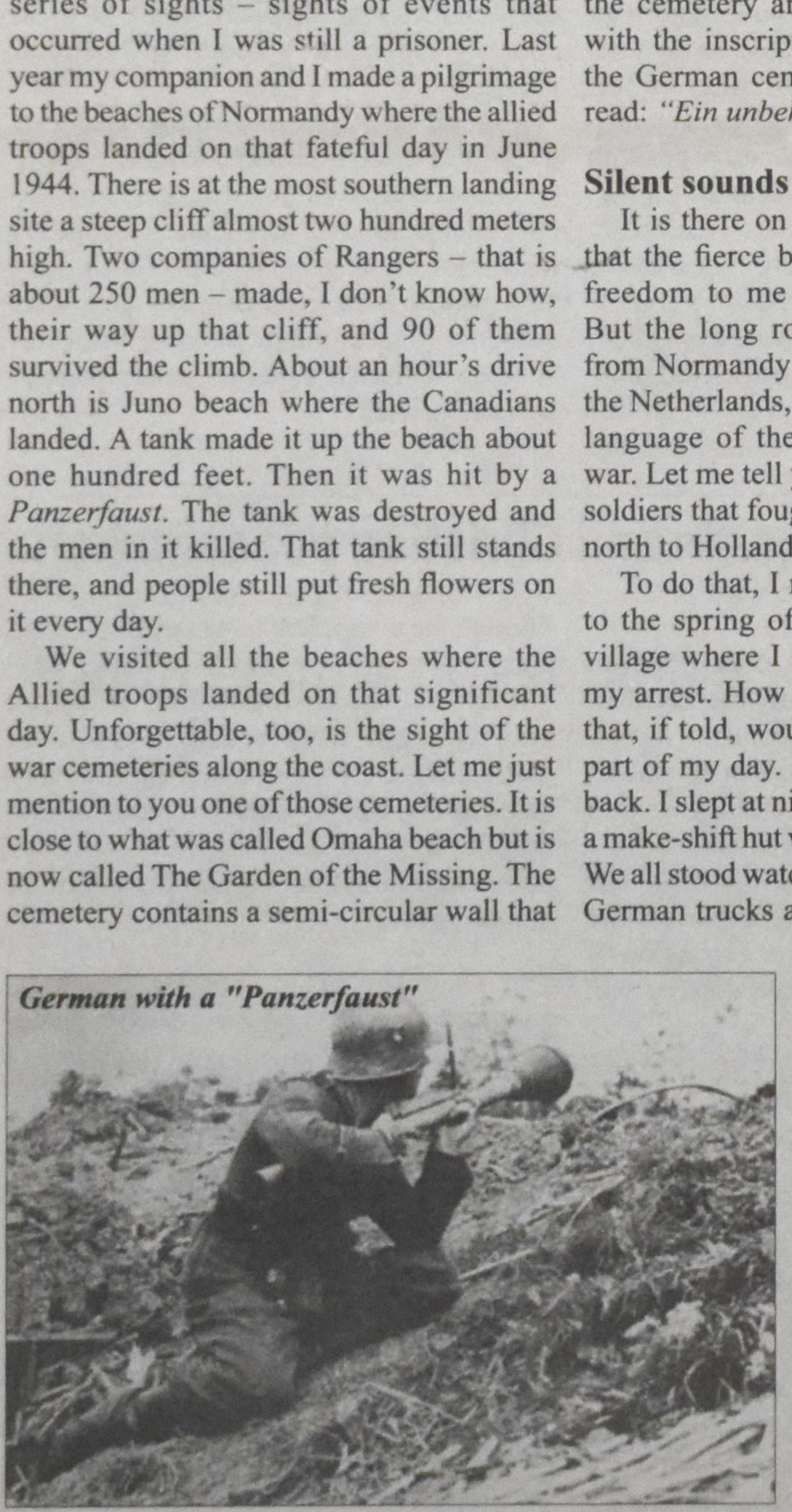
But nine months later I received a letter from the Dutch government telling me to report to a military hospital in my town for a medical examination. Soon after that I became a soldier myself and was shipped overseas to the other end of the world – to what is now Indonesia. I served there with the third battalion of the Dutch Princess Irene regiment, the same regiment that had landed in Normandy. As a matter of fact, one of those men who had landed in Normandy served in my company. In that far-away Indonesia, fighting a war became for me a personal experience. The fear and fright of battle became part of my person, and I don't think it ever left me.

In one of those rather fierce fights with an Indonesian army group that still included many Japanese soldiers I was shot three times – once in the stomach, which usually meant that your number had come up. I was transported to a field hospital where a triage nurse sent my stretcher with me on it to a corner. She did not consider me a likely candidate for survival. Others who had a greater chance of survival were treated first and operated on. All this time I was in and out of consciousness. I know that a chaplain prayed with me, And I also clearly remember, as if it happened yesterday, that a doctor came to my stretcher, looked at me, and said with a loud Dutch curse: "Dammit, this guy is still alive." The sound of those words have never left me. And when on my birthdays I wear in my lapel my decoration, the one which the Yankees call the purple heart, I say to myself, quoting that doctor, "Dammit, I am still alive."

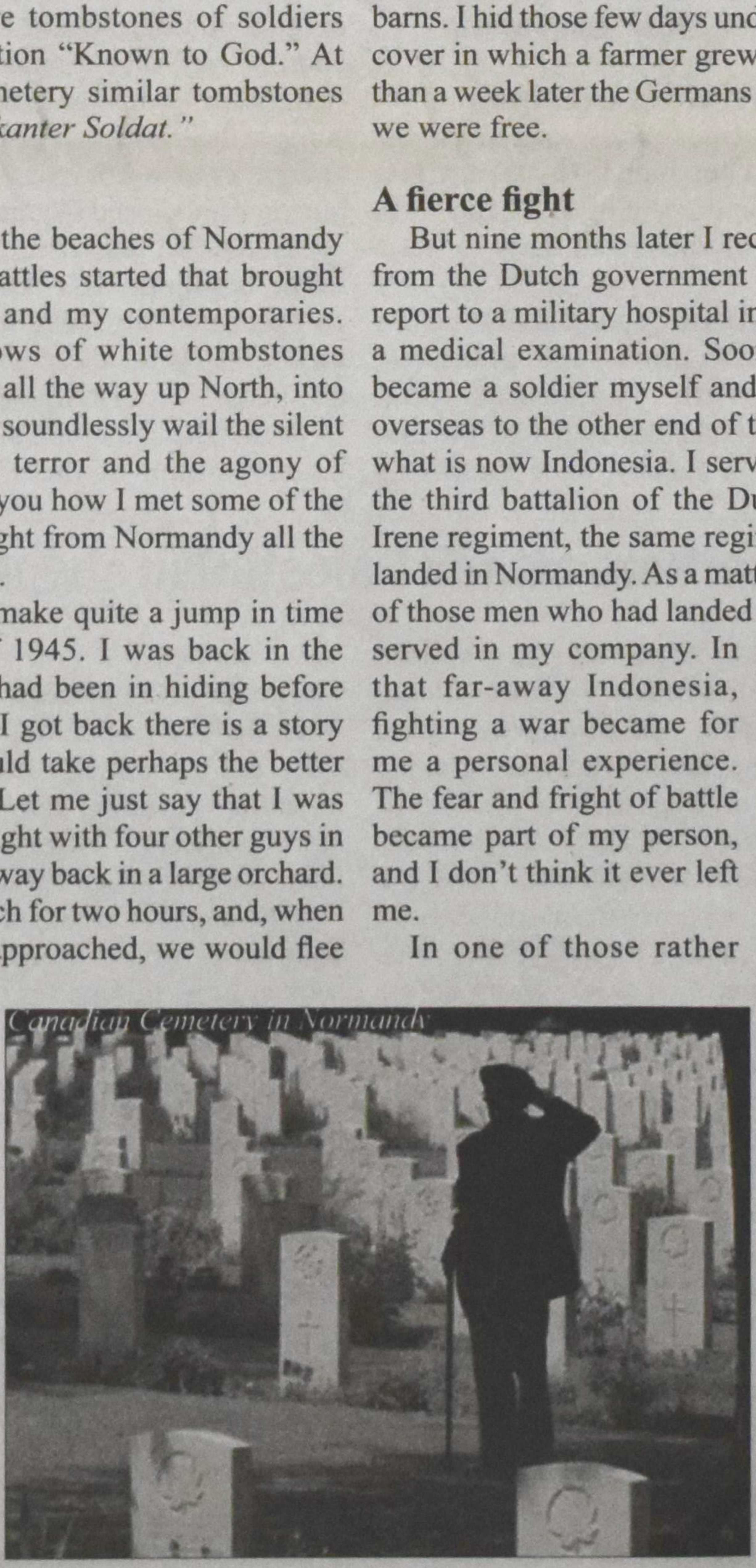
In conclusion, I want to cite the words of Psalm 46: "Be still, and know that I am God." I know many people consider that a call to silent meditation somewhere in some monastery or on some mountaintop. Preachers often use that text to introduce a moment of silent prayer at the beginning of the service. Well, let me tell you, it is anything but that. In fact, I detect a somewhat harsh sound to those words. Imagine, for a moment, a family at a time when the children are quarrelling and fighting. Finally, one of the parents yells: "Enough, quit it." That is a picture of the ending of Psalm 46 – He, our God, "makes wars cease to the ends of the earth; he breaks the bow and shatters the spear, he burns the shield with fire." So enough already. Quit it. "Be still, and know that I am God."

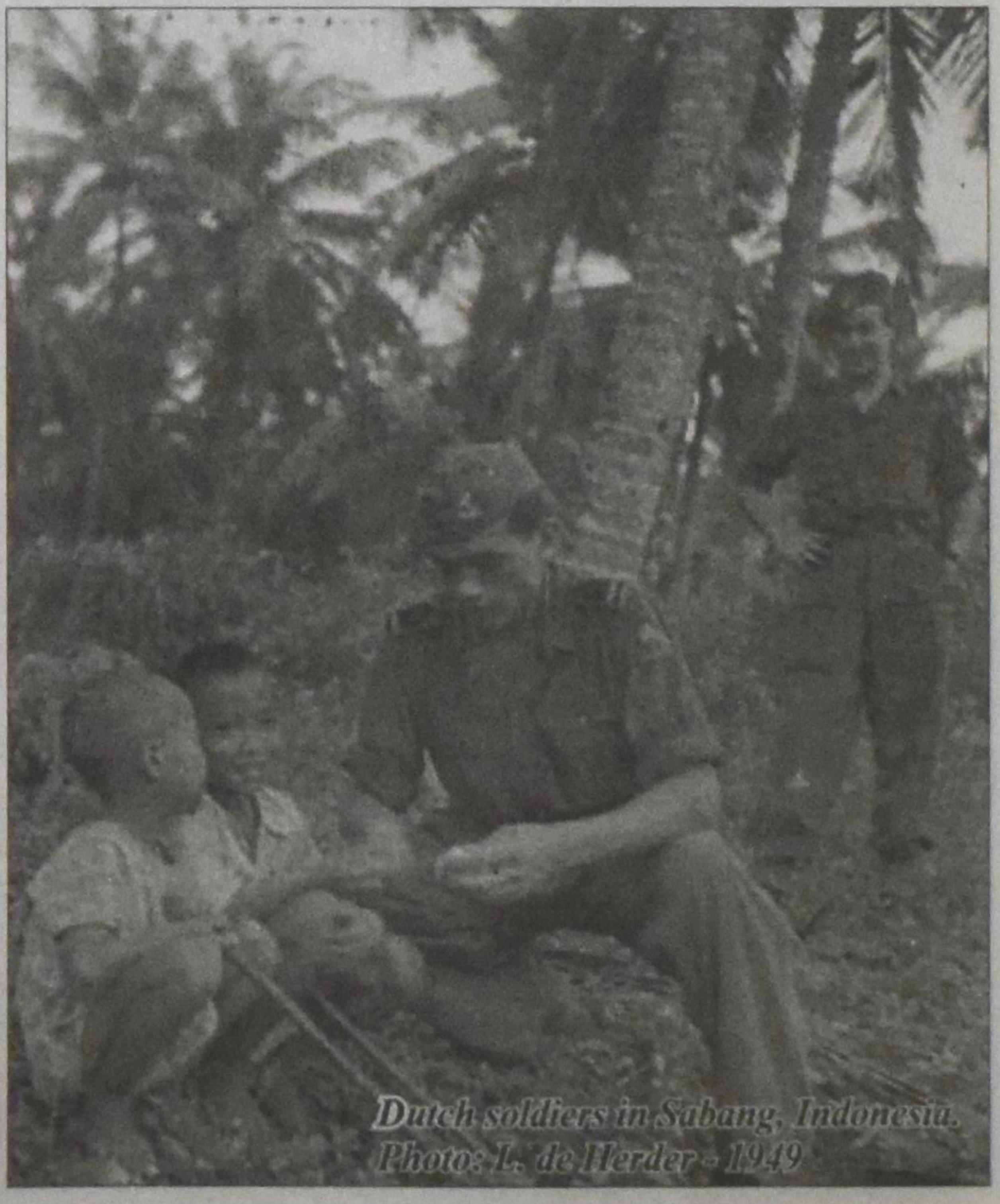
Carl Tuyl (ctuyl@rogers.com) is an 84-year-old retired minister of the Christian Reformed Church. He lives in Toronto.

German with a "Panzerfaust"



Canadian Cemetery in Normandy





Dutch soldiers in Sabang, Indonesia.
Photos L. de Herder - 1949

The living God in your midst (Part II)

Hereby you shall know that the living God is among you.

Jos. 3:10a.

Introduction from Part I:

The pure, undefiled mystical body of our Lord Jesus Christ on earth, the church, is a wonderful entity. Nothing impure can enter it, and not one of God's children remains outside. It has the anointing of the Holy One and possesses all knowledge. All the powers of eternal life, and all the glory of the Kingdom are hidden within it. And there is no comfort on earth ever tasted by one of God's children, no lasting spiritual refreshment enjoyed by a pilgrim on the way to the new Jerusalem, or it flowed to them through the arteries of the holy body of our Lord....

Just where can we find the key to this holy witness, on which the justification of the godless as well as the peace of God's children depends? Only in the fact that the *Holy Spirit resides* in this body of Christ.

Christ is no longer here on earth. He is seated on the throne of glory in heaven. The crown of glory shines eternally on the head of David's great Son, as the Psalmist tells us. [see Psalm 132:11]. He who ascended into heaven remains there for our benefit. He does not rest in holy inactivity, but just as the Father is always working, so also the Son works. And this divine labour of the Lord Christ in heaven is for the benefit of his people.

He prays for his people. He is the assurance of the rich reconciliation in his blood. As our High Priest he attends to the holy of holies in Heaven, he who is our one and only sacrifice. He also prepares a place for us, and invites us by calling us with irresistible grace. So he does not do anything just *in heaven* but constantly works from heaven to effect his purposes on earth.

His work reaches everywhere

The Lord Jesus Christ stays in one place only. He lives in our human flesh, and cannot be in two separate places at once, even though in heaven so many of earth's limitations fall away. Heaven is not a place of magic, but a real world, and so the law of separation between one place and another remains valid there too.

But even though the Lord Christ is limited to one place at one time, such limitations do not inhibit his work. The Lord's work extends powerfully, and reaches out in various ways to every place for it possesses the glorious ability of the divine "*all-at-the-same-time.*" This is truly a divine attribute; it means that at one and the same moment God reaches out to Asia and Bosnia, to Peru and your town, city or village. And, even though he is omnipresent to all at the same time, he is yet so near to all of us that he listens to our individual cries in our prayers as if they are the only ones addressed to him at that moment.

This divine "*all-at-the-same-time*" is also an attribute of our Lord Jesus Christ. Even if he is seated on the heavenly throne, his majesty, grace and Spirit are able to extend to all the corners of the earth at the same time. And just as our head can control and respond to any part of our body at any given moment, so also does the exalted Head impact his mystical Body.

No matter how far this Body is spread out, any part of this Body cannot suffer in the least, or Jesus knows about it. Just as when you prick yourself on any area of your skin with a pin, you will know it immediately. In this way, there is no member of this Body, however insignificant, to whom the power of our Lord Jesus does not reach out so that he, our Lord Jesus Christ, will also be a comfort to that poor overlooked soul. In fact that Body does not live its own life, but allows the Lord Jesus to live within it. The Head controls the body, leads the body and energizes it. It is Immanuel who works his will within its members.

But even now, after all this, we have not yet touched the depth of this mystery. It may well be that we share in this Body and that this Body is given life in Jesus Christ its Head, but that does not yet explain the real mystery of how your "I," your "soul," your internal hidden self can have such an intimate relationship with that Mediator and Saviour, and rejoice in it.

He is our splendid, thoughtful, living, leading and protecting Head, who accompanies us all and does everything for us. We, on the other hand, if left to our own initiative, work not for God but for Satan. If Jesus should ever let go of us in our last hour, we could not expect an entry into Heaven, but we would be lost. This is the real Mystery.

The abyss yawns before us, our faith can lift us over it, but still the mystery is not cleared up; we need further explanation. A clarification of this mystery comes to us on Pentecost.

Can you have communion *with the Father,* without a mediator? Certainly not, because the Father is the origin and creative power of all things. But it is not the Father who descends to his church on earth, "One God and Father from whom and to whom are all things." (1Cor. 8:6)

Only through the Spirit

Again, do you have immediate fellowship *with the Son*? We do not, for no one can affirm that Jesus is Lord, except through the Holy Spirit. Indeed, he took on our flesh, and created fellowship with our human nature, but that definitely does not include fellowship with our *inner consciousness*. That is why it was good that Jesus should leave the disciples, for unless he left them, he could not send another Comforter.

Please note this carefully: fellowship with the *Father* is not possible except *through the Son.* "No one knows who the Father is except the Son, and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him." (Luke 10:22)

And again, there is no communion with the Son, *except through the Holy Spirit.* For no one can say, "Jesus is Lord", except through the Holy Spirit. (1 Cor. 12:3) So only when the Holy Spirit has come, can he bring all the treasures of Christ, and begin to exalt him in you.

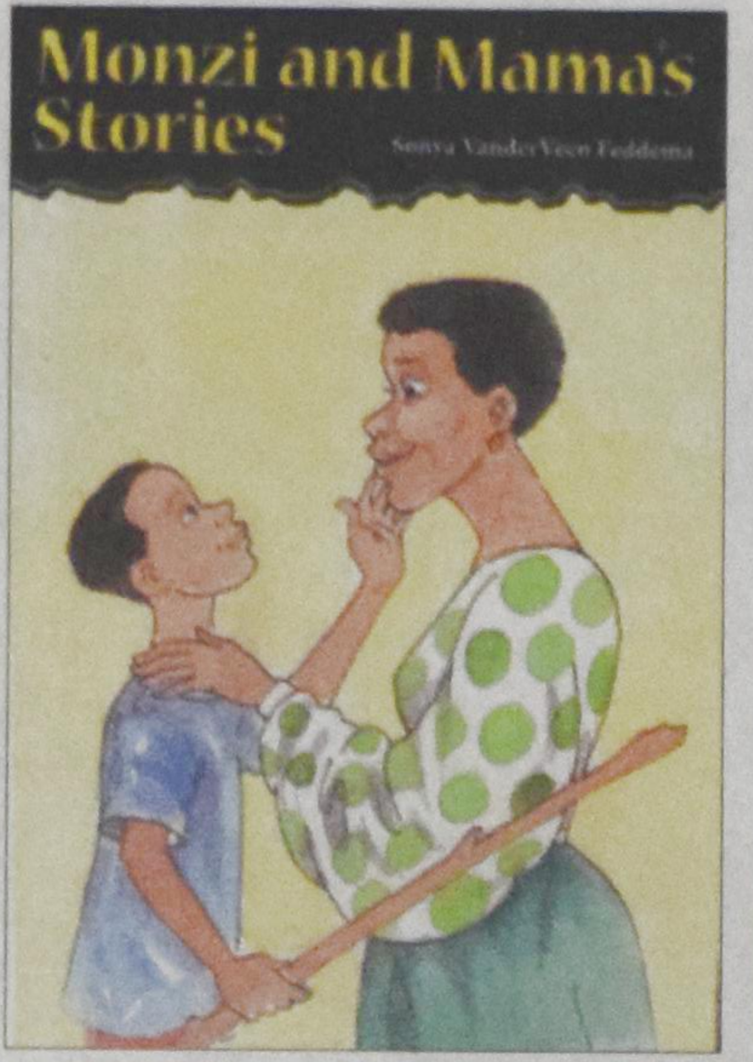
Once that happens, and the Holy Spirit resides in you, then, through the same Spirit, the Son will come and through him the Father will also come to you. That is why the Lord Jesus could prophesy so jubilantly that he himself and the Father would come, and live with you, that is, after the Comforter has been sent. (John 14:23,26)

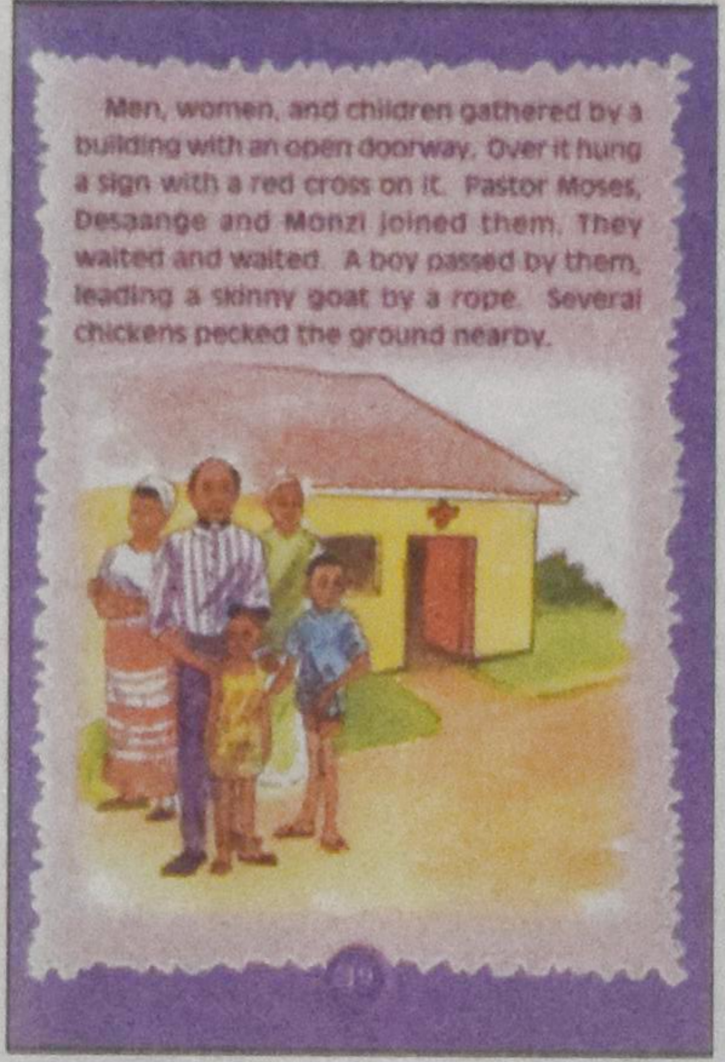
This is part II of this chapter from Pentecost (with Ascension Day) *by Abraham Kuyper translated by Jack Van Meggelen (jack@vanmeggelen.ca).*

Review

The Story Behind Manzi and Mama's Stories

Brandon Jorritsma





Sonya VanderVeen Feddema has wanted to write a children's picture book for over twenty years. This long germinating seed has finally sprouted: her new book, *Manzi and Mama's Stories*, has been published by Phoenix Publishers. The publisher's location in Kenya, a common destination of refugees from neighbouring countries, is appropriate considering what the story is about. It tells of a young boy named Manzi whose close bond to his mother is destroyed by civil conflict and relocation to a refugee camp, but whose hope for a better future is bolstered by the support of friends and aid workers, and, most of all, by his memories of his loving mother and her storytelling.

Though *Manzi and Mama's Stories* is not an explicitly Christian story, the instances of providence in the long process of this book's creation testify to Sonya's conviction that "God has something to say about all of life." Even refugees experience moments of common grace amid the horrors they endure. In order to deliver a message of hope, Sonya believes God preserved her desire to write a children's book until the right time. The time finally arrived when she heard of a refugee learning-tour arranged by the Christian Reformed World Relief Committee.

Holy Spirit driven

Having supported refugees sponsorship work since 1999, Sonya says she felt compelled by a "piercing in my heart from the Holy Spirit" to take that trip in March 2007, despite the difficulty of financing the journey. You can read Sonya's account of the trip in the April 30, 2007, issue of *Christian Courier*.

When she returned to her St. Catharines home she wrote a drama, "God Keeps the Refugee," as thanks to God for the opportunity to go on the trip, but she still felt compelled to write more. She prayed intently, as she would through the entire process, that God would guide her in creating a children's book. She then contacted Mary Amolo, a Ugandan aid worker she had met briefly on the trip, a "kindred spirit" with whom she felt an instantaneous connection.

Mary provided stories from several children in the Kyangwali Refugee Settlement to give Sonya a better understanding of what they have experienced. The brutality of these stories and the persisting trauma the children still experience presented a problem: How would she adapt the terrible experiences which forever haunt those who survive them into something that children will read? Moreover, what is the point of simply chronicling the evils done by humans to humans? Sonya eventually concluded, "You need to make it real, but not too traumatizing. You've got to get across [a message of] hope."

Supported by the encouragement and advice of many people, including a local refugee couple and the class her husband teaches at Beacon Christian Secondary School, Sonya continued working on the book and eventually gained a mentor and inspiration in Nyambura Mpesha, a Kenyan who teaches Kiswahili at Calvin College, when she by God's grace paged through an issue of a magazine she usually disregards – Calvin's *Spark* – and found an article reporting about Nyambura and some literary awards she had just received in her home country. Sonya again experienced the same push of the Holy Spirit she had previously felt when she had heard of the chance to visit the refugee camps. Now she was being compelled to contact Nyambura and ask for feedback on her story

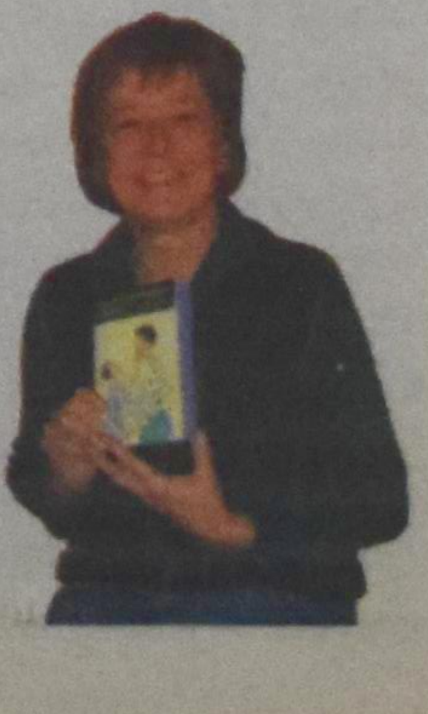
A door will open

"The Lord blessed my obedience," Sonya says, because Nyambura was eager to help and lead her through several rewrites. Furthermore, Nyambura encouraged Sonya when she felt that she would never find a publisher. If the publication of her book was God's will, it would happen. Nyambura said, "We do not have to be perfect to bear the message. Nobody has a right to tell us we do not have a message if God has put it in our hearts . . . not even the publishers. So let us not worry about the journey of your writing. A door for publishing will open when the story is complete."

A door did open when Nyambura sent Sonya's story to her publisher in Kenya, who accepted it and commissioned an artist to create accompanying illustrations. Sonya hopes that refugees and ordinary children in Kenya will benefit from the story. Displaced children living there can be "given a picture of hope," she says. As the main character Manzi experiences in the story, the love of a lost father or mother "can pursue a child all their lives, even if they've been through very difficult circumstances." Kenyan children, she hopes, will gain a more compassionate understanding of the refugees living among them, as refugees are often resented for various reasons.

Additionally, Sonya hopes that children in North America can read the book and appreciate how blessed they are simply because of where they were born. Too many people in our society have a sense of entitlement, Sonya believes, and it is her hope that her book, along with the always growing body of literature that speaks to our society on behalf of refugees, will help change this attitude. At present there is no distributor or publisher of *Manzi and Mama's Stories* for the North American market, but Sonya and others are praying that another door will soon be opened.

Manzi and Mama's Stories can be ordered from http://www.phoenixpublishers.co.ke. Sonya is donating all her royalties to CRWRC-Canada. To encourage Sonya or request a performance of her drama "God Keeps the Refugee," email her at sonyavf55@hotmail.com.



Sonya with her book

The resourceful storyteller

Kate Chambers

My son thinks stories come out of the oven. Every morning he jumps into my bed and demands a fresh story. "You've had all night to bake it, Mummy," he says.

We live in Zimbabwe, where books – like bread and many other basics – are hard to find. The government bookseller, Kingstons, hasn't had new books for months.

Back home in England, my mother tries to fill the gap, searching in her attic for the Ladybird books she squirreled away when my sisters and I graduated to storybooks without pictures.

She packs them up with packets of biscuit mix and instant custard and sends them to Zimbabwe. But Mum's packages often take months to reach us. Fuel shortages mean that the state postal service can move the mail infrequently from the main sorting office in Harare to post offices around the country.

In the meantime, what do you do with a 4-year-old who's desperate for his daily tale? You concoct it yourself.

My boy believes that his mother can make most things in the kitchen. No bread? Mummy will make a hot-milk sponge cake to put in his school snack box. No candies? Mummy can freeze homemade lemon juice in a plastic cup to make a lollipop. I use a stalk of lemon grass as a "stick." So Sam thinks I should rustle up stories in just the same way.

Living in Zimbabwe has taught me to make do with what's in the pantry. I've learned to substitute jam for honey, custard powder for eggs, and the orange cape gooseberries that grow wild next to my fennel for blueberries when I'm baking muffins.

Important ingredients

When it comes to making up stories, I've also had to adapt the recipe. I know from hours spent in libraries that a story needs several ingredients: a strong main character with a burning quest, a few spoonfuls of conflict, and a dollop of redemption at the end.

I don't have to look far for the inspiration for my main character. She's not actually inside my pantry, but given half a chance she'd be there in a flash. Her name is Ruby. Ruby is our 2-year-old Rottweiler/Labrador mix.

In life as in fiction, Ruby is a lovable rogue. If Mummy's sandal goes missing, Ruby will invariably be found chewing it under the banana tree. If someone steals the kittens' supper, it's always Ruby who's slinking under the bougainvillea licking her lips.

So there's my ready-mixed conflict: Ruby versus Mummy. Ruby's quest is obvious: She has one thing on her mind and that's the next meal.

Into my story bowl go a few friendly monsters, a triceratops and a couple of tropical rainstorms. I beat in a bit of local color: Lake Kariba in western Zimbabwe is a favorite setting. In her never-ending search for edibles, Ruby puts her nose into places she shouldn't, gets captured by not-too-dangerous pirates, and is saved (of course) by Super Sam.

It's the redemption part that's problematic. Is it far-fetched to expect Ruby, in her relief at being rescued, to promise never to be greedy again? I fear my stories may flop, as my cakes do when I open the oven too soon. But Sam seems satisfied.

I read once that as long as you bake a cake with love, it'll taste fine. Perhaps it's the same for stories.

From the Nov. 19, 2008 edition of the Christian Science Monitor

Going to Bethlehem with the Magi

Frank Sawyer

Every year the Wisemen come from the East to visit the newborn Jesus. Sometimes they are called the "Three Kings." We see the star high in the heavens, we see the Magi coming on their camels, and we see them kneeling before Jesus in the stable.

They are welcome guests at every Christmas time. 'But', you say, 'it isn't Christmas yet!' That is true, it is still Advent. So in this meditation I will speak especially about the Advent of the Wisemen, not about their Christmas.

Before we begin the trip with them, let us clarify a few things.

What does "Advent" mean? It means: "coming." During this time of the year we speak about the coming, the Advent of Jesus into the world.

Who were the Wisemen? The word "Magi" used in the Bible is a Persian word, so they probably came from Persia.

Why have they often been called "kings"? Because such astrologers worked at the royal court of the king.

Why three? Because they brought three kinds of presents, so three is a good guess.

Also, they are often shown on Christmas cards in the stable. But they came later. In church history, "Three Kings Day" is January 6, after Christmas. But Matthew 2: 11 says that they entered the house, not the stable – so perhaps they arrived much later.

Let's begin the journey – perhaps with three Wisemen, and perhaps on camels. But more important is to say something about the road.

The road

If we begin a journey, we need some orientation. Actually, the word "orientation" comes from "Orient," which means: the East. They came from the Orient. They could orient themselves very well by the stars. They saw things in the patterns of stars that we perhaps do not see. They did not distinguish greatly between astrology and astronomy. In any case, they saw a special star arise.

This is in line with what God said to Abraham. When Abraham didn't see much future hope, God said: "Look up to the heavens! Count the stars!" Abraham couldn't do that of course. But we read that he trusted God, and God then called him a righteous person.

That's about how it went with the Magi from Persia. They looked at the stars. In this way they were led on by a sign from God.

It is important to underline a few aspects concerning the long road. They were led by a star. God spoke to them in their own language, that is, according to their own area of knowledge. God does that more often, don't you find? Different kinds of people meet God in different ways, along different roads.

Scientists experience God's revelation in the precise fine-tuning of the creation. Some people meet God in music. Others in the warmth of their family and their circle of friends. Some in the sunrise over the hills.

A detour

God spoke to them in their own language of the stars. Yet at some point they lost their way. They saw the star, but they did not see the newborn king. So they went and asked another king – Herod. He, in turn, asked the chief priests and teachers of the law where the king of the Jews was to be born. The Jewish teachers quoted Micah 5:2 and concluded that the Christ was to be born "In Bethlehem, in Judea" (Matthew 2:1-5).

So, not Jerusalem, but Bethlehem. We all make our own pilgrimage, but we begin at different starting points, and we don't arrive at the same time. The Wisemen came later than the Shepherds. We often take a side road. Sometimes we see the star, and sometimes not.

Why could the Wisemen not find Jesus? The star had brought them to Jerusalem. That was part of the road God had planned for them. In this way these foreigners and heathen (pagans) could bring the good news to others. But for king Herod it was not good news. For the priests and theology teachers it was an easy quiz: they could find the text in the prophet Micah in a few seconds. "Yes," they said by heart: "Micah, chapter 5 verse 2." Such Bible knowledge! Yet these religious leaders did not follow the road to Bethlehem.

Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528) painting Adoration of the Magi

Perhaps we think: Why a side road? The Wisemen could have arrived more quickly had they gone straight to Bethlehem. But the Lord God has divine reasons. When you and I sometimes find ourselves making a detour (following a side road), God has a purpose for this. We think we need to go to the centre, to Jerusalem. But God often brings us to Bethlehem, to a less central place or situation – but if Jesus is there, then we are at the right place.

We need to look not only at the road, but also at the star. As the Hungarian poet Kányádi wrote during the dark days of communism:

my fears my hopes don't disappear
this is the grace that helps me stay
this caring providential fear
has held my hand along the way

After hearing the explanation of the Scriptures, according to the prophet Micah, the Wisemen went on to Bethlehem. We read in Matthew 2: 9: "The star went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was." So let us not say that God gives us an unreadable map. But we need more than a star. The more precise information came from the Bible. But Bible knowledge was not the final goal. As someone has said: "The Word became flesh, but we turned it into a book." However, the goal is to meet Jesus and worship him.

The distance

Let's now take a look at the distance. It is possible that the road is long, with a detour. But it's not only the road that plays a role – so does the distance. The Wisemen were not members of God's people (as were the Shepherds, for example). The Magi spoke another language. In fact, we may well think: What are they doing here? They aren't even from Europe or North America. They are a different colour than me, and they are not Reformed. They seem strange to us.

Yet, we all begin our pilgrimage somewhere. We all follow our own road. We arrive earlier or later. One person grows up with faith; another finds it much later in life. We have different presents for Jesus: one brings gold, another myrrh. One person presents his work, another her children, and some others their help for the poor.

Sign of hope

The history of the Magi reminds us that God works in different places and in different ways – also with people who are very different from us. But if we have all met Jesus, then there is something that binds us together. Then we are no longer strangers for each other. This could bring good changes, also in our world today. If we miss such "reconciliation" with others, then it is a question as to whether we have ever been to Bethlehem. All of us are sometimes far from the Lord, and only brought close by grace.

That is what the Apostle Paul says in his letter to the congregation in Ephesus: The Saviour came and brought the Good News of "peace to you who were far away, and peace to those who were near." That is our great sign of hope.

However, there is also a deeper thought here: the real road with a very long distance was travelled by the Saviour himself – from heaven to earth – from glory to the life of a servant – from Bethlehem to the cross.

The Word became human, but often we only have a stable to offer him – sometimes only a cross.

Jesus is coming! He has already travelled the road, and now he is coming not as a child, but as the Saviour of our life.

Sometimes we personally have to wait a long time for the Lord and for our salvation. The church on earth has been waiting a long time for the return of Christ.

But the darkness doesn't matter: for we can see the Morningstar rising.

Frank Sawyer (sawyer@t-online.hu) is professor of theology and ethics at Saraspatak Theological School, in Saraspatak, Hungary

Sermon

Joseph in the spotlight

Rev. H.A. Visser
A Dutch Christian radio message translated by Bert Witvoet

I want to draw your attention to someone who modestly remains in the background to the extent that he's hardly noticeable in the Christmas story. Perhaps it's even better to say that you don't discover that he assumes an important role in the Christmas story until you ask at a given moment why he is practically ignored in the Gospel of Luke. I'm talking about Joseph.

Modest people draw attention to themselves by not drawing attention to themselves. They are saying so much because they hardly say anything. You don't notice them until you ask yourself suddenly, "Where is he?"

The man we are talking about did not suffer from feelings of inferiority, nor was he shy. He was not a man who used modesty as a trick to draw attention to himself. He was truly modest, modest from the inside out. In the Christmas story he played a decisive role, but he did this in such an inconspicuous way that there is hardly room for him in the Christmas carols. We sing extensively about the shepherds and the wise men, but seldom do we sing about Joseph. As a matter of fact, Luke almost forgets to mention his name, let alone that he makes explicit why the role that Joseph plays in the story of salvation is so important. I'm talking about Joseph — the man in the shadow — the human being who is truly modest.

Yet, he was the one who makes it possible for us to sing that Jesus is David's son. The Bible does not provide Mary, an ordinary girl from Nazareth, with a genealogy. She was a descendant of Aaron. That's all we know. As for Joseph, there is a family tree — two even. Joseph, according to these genealogies, is the son of David and of Abraham, the son of Noah, the son of Seth, the son of Adam, the son of God. That's who Joseph was.

Expressions of outrage

Last week two people phoned me. In their voices you could hear the blood of the martyrs boil. Both of them suspected that I probably did not believe in the virgin birth of Jesus. One of them even went as far as to say: "Now, I want to know exactly from you — are you a proponent of the virgin birth or an opponent?" It was clear that the continuation of the Dutch Christian Broadcast Association (NCRV) depended on my answer to this question. Imagine being "a proponent of the virgin birth!"

If it had not been so intensely nauseating, bloodthirsty and full of heresy-hunting, I would have found it almost comical. My only answer at that time was: "Next week, Thursday evening, at ten minutes before eight, you will receive my answer. At this time I am not saying anything." I must say that there was a question burning on my lips, which I wisely withheld, but which I put to them now via this broadcast: "If you are such a 'proponent' of the virgin birth, how do you explain then that Jesus is called 'the Son of David'? Jesus can be the 'Son of David' only through Joseph, who was indeed a son of David. If you are such a proponent of the virgin birth, then you can't possibly refer to Jesus as the 'Son of David.'" Of course, by putting this question to this "proponent of the virgin birth" I had placed him before a dilemma: either Jesus is born of the Virgin Mary, but then he is not the "Son of David," or Jesus is the "Son of David" through Joseph, but then he is not born of the Virgin Mary.

A quiet man of action

I would like to say all kinds of things about the virgin birth this evening, but I want to talk with you about Joseph, the modest man par excellence. He was a descendant of King David. You can read it in Matthew 1 and Luke 2: "So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David." Joseph didn't make much of his royal connections, but he remained a simple carpenter who, traveling from farm to farm with his tools on his back, had ended up 150 kilometers from his birthplace, Bethlehem, in Nazareth, where he fell in love with a simple village girl. He sincerely planned to marry this girl and stay in Nazareth to live a long and happy life with her.

But then he discovered that this girl to whom he was engaged was pregnant. Now an engagement in those days counted the same as a marriage. Her extra-marital pregnancy was such a terrible thing in those days that the betrayed fiancé had the right to allow his future bride to be stoned. Adultery on the part of an engaged woman amounted to breaking a marriage vow. The logical outcome was that Mary would be killed. According to Jewish law, Joseph could not marry her either, because then he, too, became guilty of violating a marriage vow. The only possibility left to him was to quietly hand her a letter, in which he would tell her that he divorced her and that he would leave Nazareth.

Change in plans

He had a good explanation for leaving. Emperor Augustus had issued a decree that everyone should return to his own town to register his property there. Thus Joseph had to leave Nazareth to declare his fixed possessions in Bethlehem, where as descendant of David he had a piece of land. This way he could depart without causing difficulties for Mary, and never return to Nazareth, where he had been so disappointed by Mary's betrayal.

But everything turned out differently. While he was deliberating all this (no one except he apparently knew that Mary was expecting a baby) the Angel Gabriel appeared to him to tell him that Mary had not committed adultery and had not betrayed him, but that she was to be the mother of the Messiah. At this point it becomes evident what a fine person Joseph really is. He quickly changes his plans — he does not leave Mary behind in Nazareth, but he takes her along on his long journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Because of his actions, not one person in Nazareth has any cause for thinking ill of Mary, let alone speaking ill of her. Their child can be born in Bethlehem after they have lived there for a few months. And when they return to Nazareth for good, years later (they still have to flee to Egypt), there won't be a soul there who can possibly think ill of Mary.

Joseph's unmistakable presence

After all this, you practically don't hear about Joseph anymore in the Bible. The couple arrives in Bethlehem, and, after they have stayed there for a while, Jesus is

born. I am going to skip a lot of details at this point because I want to look with you whether anything more is said in Luke about Joseph. All we read is that Mary brought her child into this world and wrapped it in cloths. You would expect that Joseph took care of that. But Luke says nothing about that. It is remarkable that, when the Angel tells the shepherds that the Messiah has been born, he says, "This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." For the second time you are struck by the comment that the child is wrapped in cloths. You would think that in both cases the comment is totally superfluous. Which mother would not provide her baby with a diaper?

Luther, in one of his sermons, avoided the question why Luke repeats that Jesus was wrapped in cloths by saying that Mary wrapped her child in an old a pair of Joseph's trousers. But when you read Ezekiel 16: 4 you discover that the repeated detail is very important. According to Ezekiel 16:4, if a man did not want to recognize the child that his wife had brought into the world, he would, without washing and rubbing it with salt and wrapping it in cloth, throw it naked into a field, leaving it behind as a foundling. Mary, however, was allowed by Joseph to wrap her child in cloths. By allowing this, Joseph recognized that Jesus was his son. We can deduce this even though Joseph's name is not mentioned. He did this in faithful obedience. This way Jesus became the "Son of David."

An act of faith

Joseph is an inconspicuous figure in the Christmas story. Nevertheless, the part that he plays can hardly be overestimated in significance. He was righteous, says Matthew. This does not mean that he was a believer in the sense that Paul later gives to the term "righteous." It means that he was faithful to the law and, at the same time, that he was a really good man. At first he had no choice but to quietly leave his pregnant fiancée, who had betrayed him so deeply. No other possibility remained for him who loved Mary except to go to Bethlehem and leave her and the baby behind in Nazareth. By being willing to do that he would actually create the impression that he had forsaken her. But he was willing to pay that price for Mary. After the message of the Angel had changed his thinking, he commits to another amazing act of faith. He takes care of Mary, takes her along to Bethlehem; and, when the child is born, he accepts it as his own child, against his better knowledge. At that moment he represents the people of Israel, who only through faith can accept Jesus as Son of David, as Messiah.

We sometimes think: why does Israel accept Jesus as Jew, but not as Messiah? Joseph's decision gives us the answer. It really is not self-evident to see Jesus as the Son of David, as the Messiah. Flesh and blood do not reveal that to you. The pagan and the Jew both have to believe that Jesus is the Saviour, the Redeemer of people.

Man is equally imporant

Today, at a time when we celebrate Christmas and place Mary, the incomparable woman ("blessed among women" as Gabriel puts it) in a central place, I would ask you not to forget Joseph. This has nothing to do with a critique of feminism. Nor do I want to bring accusations against the Roman Catholic Church for at times giving too much honour to Mary, when they see her as an intermediary and even as a co-redeemer. At this point I am interested only in accentuating the fact that the man, in the person of Joseph the carpenter, takes in a place that is equally significant as that of the woman, in the person of Mary.

We have a tendency to think that faith is more a female concern than it is a male concern. Some of us may say that faith has more to do with feelings than with understanding. And we point out that the majority of churchgoers and believers consist of women. There are quite a few men who are too embarrassed to believe; too many men who want to be macho and say that faith is a woman's business, and that those men who do believe are too soft and too feminine. All of this is nonsense, of course. Not only would a sociological study come to a different conclusion, but in Roman Catholicism, men, throughout the ages, have set the tone. From this we may conclude that believing is as much a male as it is a female affair.

Judged by their deeds

For that reason I always hesitate a bit to speak of "our mother church" and of Mary, who has become somewhat the prime model for all believers. When we see Mary that way, we forget that in her hymn of praise she is so political and revolutionary that you are inclined to think of her as a man. Joseph is also present in the history of the church. He is the man who in all his modesty stays in the background. You won't find a statement made by him in the whole Bible. Even in the account of the 12-year-old Jesus in the temple Mary is the one who speaks up.

But this extremely modest man, who does not sing a hymn of praise, who is conspicuous by his inconspicuous manner, stands silently among us with his faith. He shows himself through his actions, like so many men, many fathers, many husbands, who, when it has to do with their faith, seldom open their mouth. As child or spouse you may sometimes ask yourself, "Does he really believe?" Some of these men die without ever giving a clear testimony of their faith, but of whom you may (may? No must) presume that they truly believed because they showed it in their actions.

Joseph, who came from a good family, who himself was an ordinary carpenter in Nazareth, who fell in love with a girl from a farmer's village, did not forsake her, even though he thought the worst of her. He stayed faithful to her. This Joseph confessed his faith in Christ when he did not reject Mary's child but called Jesus his Saviour.

Isn't it wonderful when you have such a man!

Isn't it wonderful when you are such a man!

Reverend Visser was for decades a popular preacher in the Westerkerk *in Amsterdam. He was especially known for his radio messages (NCRV) that were intermixed with classical and choral music in the program entitled* "Onder de hoogtezon."

Incarnation: the Solution to God's Dilemma

Excerpts from an apologetical treatise by fourth-century theologian Athanasius

After the Fall, human beings, who had been created in God's image and … reflected the very Word himself, was disappearing, and the work of God was being undone. The law of death, which followed from the Transgression, prevailed upon us, and from it there was no escape…. What was God, being Good, to do? Was he to let corruption and death have their way with humankind? In that case, what was the use of having made them in the beginning? Surely it would have been better never to have been created at all than, having been created, to be neglected and perish. It was impossible that God should leave people to be carried off by corruption, because it would be unfitting and unworthy of himself….

What, or, rather, who was it that was needed for such grace and such recall as we required? Who, save the Word of God himself, who also in the beginning had made all things out of nothing? His part it was, and his alone, both to bring again the corruptible to incorruption and to maintain for the Father his consistency of character with all….

A new entrance

For this purpose, then, the incorporeal and incorruptible and immaterial Word of God entered our world. In one sense, indeed, he was not far from it before, for no part of creation had ever been without him who, while ever abiding in union with the Father, yet fills all things that are. But now he entered the world in a new way, stooping to our level in his love and self-revealing to us….

He took to himself a body, a human body even as our own. Nor did he will merely to become embodied or merely to appear; had that been so, he could have revealed his divine majesty in some other and better way. No, he took our body, and not only so, but he took it directly from a spotless, stainless virgin, without the agency of human father – a pure body, untainted by intercourse with man. He, the Mighty One, the Artificer of all, himself prepared this body in the virgin as a temple for himself, and took it for his very own, as the instrument through which he was known and in which he dwelt. Thus, taking a body like our own, because all our bodies were liable to the corruption of death, he surrendered his body to death instead of all, and offered it to the Father. This he did out of sheer love for us, so that in his death all might die, and the law of death thereby be abolished....

Death has no power

The solidarity of mankind is such that, by virtue of the Word's indwelling in a single human body, the corruption which goes with death has lost its power over all. You know how it is when some great king enters a large city and dwells in one of its houses; because of his dwelling in that single house, the whole city is honored, and enemies and robbers cease to molest it. Even so is it with the King of all; he has come into our country and dwelt in one body amidst the many, and in consequence the designs of the enemy against mankind have been foiled and the corruption of death, which formerly held them in its power, has simply ceased to be. For the human race would have perished utterly had not the Lord and Saviour of all the Son of God, come among us to put an end to death….

You know what happens when a portrait that has been painted on a panel becomes obliterated through external stains. The artist does not throw away the panel, but the subject of the portrait has to come and sit for it again, and then the likeness is re-drawn on the same material. Even so was it with the All-holy Son of God. He, the Image of the Father, came and dwelt in our midst, in order that he might renew mankind made after himself, and seek out his lost sheep….

This is what Paul wants to tell us when he says: "That ye, being rooted and grounded in love, may be strong to apprehend with all the saints what is the length and breadth and height and depth, and to know the love of God that surpasses knowledge, so that ye may be filled unto all the fullness of God."

The ultimate party crasher

Paul VanderKlay

Advent began November 30 in many churches, and the text I worked on in my church is Isaiah seven. Isaiah seven finds king Ahaz in a bad spot. Judah, despite ownership of Solomon's Temple and the legitimacy of Davidic lineage, has been a two-bit kingdom often dominated by her big brother Samaria to the north. The kingdoms of Palestine always had breathing room only if the real world players like Egypt and the Mesopotamian powers were preoccupied or sufficiently self-dysfunctional. Assyria, under the uber-competent Tiglath-Pileser III ("My Trust is the Heir of Ešarra"), was pressing hard on Samaria and Damascus, so they were looking for regime change in Jerusalem to give them an ally in their "war on terror" (Assyria was a true terror!).

Ahaz was a practical man of his age. If one god is good, more gods are better. In fact, find the strongest, the most powerful gods and put them in your debt, even if it means a child sacrifice or two. You can always have more kids. Fill the hills with altars! If we all get religious maybe then someone will come to our aid! Ahaz decides to appeal directly to Tiglath. The sheep has appealed to the wolf to deal with a couple of pesky jackals. Hmmm. How might that turn out? Ahaz is practical, but a bit shortsighted.

Isaiah appears before the practical king just as he is checking on a water supply. Isaiah has a message: "The jackals you fear will soon be food for flowers! Chill!"

God then has a generous offer. "Ahaz, I've seen by your altar building and frequent trips to the fortune tellers that you're a "spiritual" man. I know you don't believe me, that's why you're so anxious, so I'll give you a token to sooth your nervous sheep heart. Just ask!"

Ahaz, despite his polytheistic flirtations has been to Sunday school and quickly gives the "Jesus" answer. "I won't test God!"

God responds, "You've spent your reign plaguing your neighbors and your countrymen, are you going to try my patience ever further?! I can't wait around all this time for you to get a clue – a maiden is with child, and this silly girl will name it "Immanuel," God is with us!"

Advent is not about who we will invite to our holiday shindigs. Advent is not about "making room for Jesus." Advent is about a rescuing God who doesn't want to wait around until we get a clue but instead acts on our behalf whether we choose to recognize him or not. God is the ultimate party crasher. Advent reminds us of this. The problem isn't "keeping him in"; the truth is there is no keeping him out! That tends to be what we don't like about him.

Paul VanderKlay (vkvoices@sbcglobal.net) is pastor of Living Stones Christian Reformed Church in Sacramento, California.

O glorious mystery

Down from His glory,
Ever living story,
My God and Saviour came,
And Jesus was his name.
Born in a manger,
To his own a stranger,

What condescension,
Bringing us redemption;
That in the dead of night,
Not one faint hope in sight,
God, gracious, tender,
Laid aside his splendour,

Without reluctance,
Flesh and blood his substance
He took the form of man,
Revealed the hidden plan.
O glorious mystery,
Sacrifice of Calvary,

William E. Booth-Clibborn

Caring for caregivers at Christmas is a special gift

Lisa M. Petsche

The Christmas season is a hectic time for many of us, due to the preparations and festivities that typically take place. Staying sane, not to mention enjoying this special time of year, is even more of a challenge for those providing care to a chronically ill relative.

Lighten the load

The following are suggestions for lightening the load of a caregiver you know.

1. Bake extra holiday treats to share with him or her (the latter will be used from here on).
2. Let the caregiver know when you are heading out to the grocery store or on other errands, and ask if there's anything she needs.
3. Offer respite for an hour so she can get her hair done or attend worship, or for a longer stretch so she can go shopping or to a holiday event.
4. Offer to decorate, wrap gifts or perform other holiday-related tasks. If the caregiver enjoys some of these activities, occupy her loved one so she can engage in them without interruption.
5. Offer to address Christmas cards and take them to the post office, or assist her in preparing and sending a newsletter to update relatives and friends.
6. If the caregiver is planning to host a party or dinner, offer to help with preparations or cleanup, or to attend to the care receiver during the event so the caregiver can concentrate on hosting duties and mingle with guests.
7. If she doesn't drive, offer transportation to the mall, a church event or somewhere else that she (and perhaps also her loved one, if feasible) would like to go.
8. Encourage the caregiver to practise self-care by eating nutritiously, exercising and getting sufficient rest in order to maintain good health. Do whatever you can to help make it possible. For example, bring over a meal or offer to sit with the care receiver while the caregiver exercises or takes a nap.
9. Surprise her with a treat, such as a rented movie, fresh flowers or a plant.
10. Ask, rather than guess, what kind of practical help would be most valuable. Perhaps it's dusting and vacuuming, doing laundry or running errands. If your assistance is declined, continue to express your desire to help. Meanwhile, take it upon yourself to deliver a casserole or muffins or, if you're a neighbour, shovel both walks or bring in both sets of garbage cans. Encourage the caregiver to ask for and accept help rather than go it alone.

Keep in mind that emotional support and your time are the two most valuable gifts you can give a caregiver, not only at Christmas but throughout the rest of the year.

Gifts of thought

- Booklet of IOUs for one or more of the following: home-cooked meals, baked goods, respite care, household chores or repairs, yard work, chauffeuring, running errands.
- Answering machine or cordless phone.
- Wall calendar with plenty of space for noting appointments.
- Caregiving binder for keeping records and organizing paperwork.
- Membership in a caregivers' organization or non-profit organization associated with her loved one's disease (for example, the Alzheimer Society or Parkinson Society).
- Home health care products that make caregiving easier and safer—for example, a bath bench.
- Gift certificate for a home health care agency, medical supply store or cleaning service.
- Book of tickets or gift voucher for accessible transportation, if her loved one is unable to ride in a car, so they can go out together.
- Inspirational book (choose a collection of verses or short stories if she doesn't have much time for reading).
- Subscription to a caregiving periodical, or a magazine that reflects an interest (such as nature) or favourite pastime (gardening, for example).
- Hardcover journal for recording her experiences, thoughts and feelings.
- Classic movie or music CD (perhaps a "greatest hits" collection by a favourite artist).
- Relaxation tapes or miniature water fountain.
- Bird feeder and seed, or binoculars for bird watching.
- Hobby or craft supplies.
- Writing paper and envelopes, or a set of all-occasion note cards, along with a book of stamps.
- Scented items: hand and body lotion, cologne, bar soap, bath salts or shower gel, drawer sachets, potpourri, votive candles.
- Basket of sweets, gourmet tea, jams and jellies or dried fruit and nuts.
- Gift certificate to a restaurant with takeout and delivery service, a dry cleaner with pickup service, or a pharmacy or grocery store that delivers.
- Two tickets to a cultural event - so a friend can accompany her and an IOU for respite care.

For higher-cost items, pool resources with family members or friends.

Lisa M. Petsche is a mother of three and a freelance journalist specializing in family life.

Life in the Fishbowl –
Why Pastors' Spouses Need Support

Rachel Boehm Van Harmelen

An online community for pastor's wives, www.pastorswives.org, is titled: "Thriving in the Fishbowl." While many pastors feel their profession has moved beyond the "glass house" phenomenon of an earlier era, pastors' families cannot escape the reality that they still play a central – and highly – visible role in the church. That role, even today, comes fraught with expectations and a level of scrutiny that can be uncomfortable, and even stressful, at times.

The Christian Reformed Church's Sustaining Pastoral Excellence (SPE) project provides resources, programs, and grants to support pastoral health and well-being so that local church ministry can thrive. An important part of allowing pastors to thrive in ministry is ensuring that the pastor's spouse and family are supported, too.

"We as pastor's spouses often live under a tremendous weight of expectations from others but also from ourselves," explains Elizabeth Nanninga, whose husband, Rick Nanninga, serves Brighton Fellowship CRC in Brighton, Ontario. "As pastors' spouses, we desire to listen and support our spouses, yet many of us have had not training in handling the weightiness and multifaceted layers of church ministry," says Nanninga.

Support Through Peer Groups

Peer groups can help equip pastors' spouses to deal with the challenges they face, says Nanninga. She recently became part of a pastors' spouses peer group called *Pastors' Spouses Share Together,* or PSST for short. "We come together regularly to listen, learn, love, and release. We meet at one of the member's homes for share and prayer, with a discussion of topics relevant to our situation," Nanninga says. Recent PSST study topics have included healthy boundaries, family care, spousal support and relationships with church. "We have a good mix of those who have been in the ministry a long time and those who have just started, so we can learn from one another," she says.

Thanks in part to the grant they receive from the CRC's Sustaining Pastoral Excellence project, Nanninga and her peers recently benefitted from a three-day retreat, a break from their normal routines to spend uninterrupted time in prayer and fellowship. "It was a great way to help us connect and open up and get to know each other better," Nanninga says. "We all felt so blessed to have this opportunity to connect as pastors' spouses. Our group has a feeling of hope and a real potential for care."

Lori Heilman has also experienced the benefits of being part of a pastors' spouses peer group. Her group, called *First Ladies of Classis Heartland* in the state of Iowa, has become a haven for her and the other spouses involved. "Our group is a safe place where concerns, struggles, and joys can be shared with complete confidentiality," Heilman says.

"I think healthy pastor families are vital if we want a pastoral ministry to be effective," says Heilman, whose husband, David was ordained in 1987. "Pastors are often under a lot of stress, and often, the spouses have no way of knowing what exactly is going on. Many church matters are confidential, so the pastor isn't free to discuss things," she says. "If the pastor's spouse doesn't have support and faces these challenges alone, it definitely puts added stress on the family."

A peer group provides a place where spouses like Heilman can speak openly and ask questions of others who have faced similar challenges. "I think we all feel free to call on the other members of our group for advice, encouragement, or prayer whenever we are facing a struggle," she says. Heilman's group, which also benefits from an SPE grant, was started by a few seasoned pastors' wives who wanted to reach out and help spouses who were new to a life in ministry. "God has blessed our group beyond what we ever would have imagined," Heilman says.

For the Many Hats You Wear

In addition to providing grants for pastors' spouses peer groups, SPE also sponsors bi-annual conferences to recognize and encourage pastors' spouses. "For the Many Hats You Wear," a conference held this past September in Grand Rapids, Michigan, did just that for the 84 pastors' wives that attended. Although the conference was open to pastors' spouses of either gender, only women responded to the invitation to attend the conference this time around.

"The conference for pastors' spouses helped me as a woman, as a mom, as a wife," says Ruth Ann Schuringa, whose spouse, Erick, serves a church in Brampton, Ontario. "I was rejuvenated spiritually and I connected with new and old friends," she says.

"If pastors' spouses are supported appropriately, they can begin to feel a full part of the congregation, using their gifts where they are gifted, having friends like anyone else," Schuringa says. While Schuringa says she has always felt well supported in her role as pastor's spouse, she has witnessed situations where a lack of support has led to despair. "Some pastor's spouses become bitter because of the hurt, the lack of friends, the unfair demands made on them and their kids," says Schuringa.

Marlene Vanderburgh became a pastor's spouse when her husband, John, entered the ministry as a second career in 2005. At the time, the couple had three children and had been married 11 years. Vanderburgh says she is "still learning" about her role as pastor's spouse, and the conference supported her on that journey. "It helped me tremendously," Vanderburgh says. "Being with other spouses and hearing their joys and stresses made me realize that I am not unique in my role. The conference also helped me realize that being a pastor's spouse is a role and not solely who I am," she says.

...Continued on p. 18

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Reflections

Christmas Greetings from Holland Christian Homes

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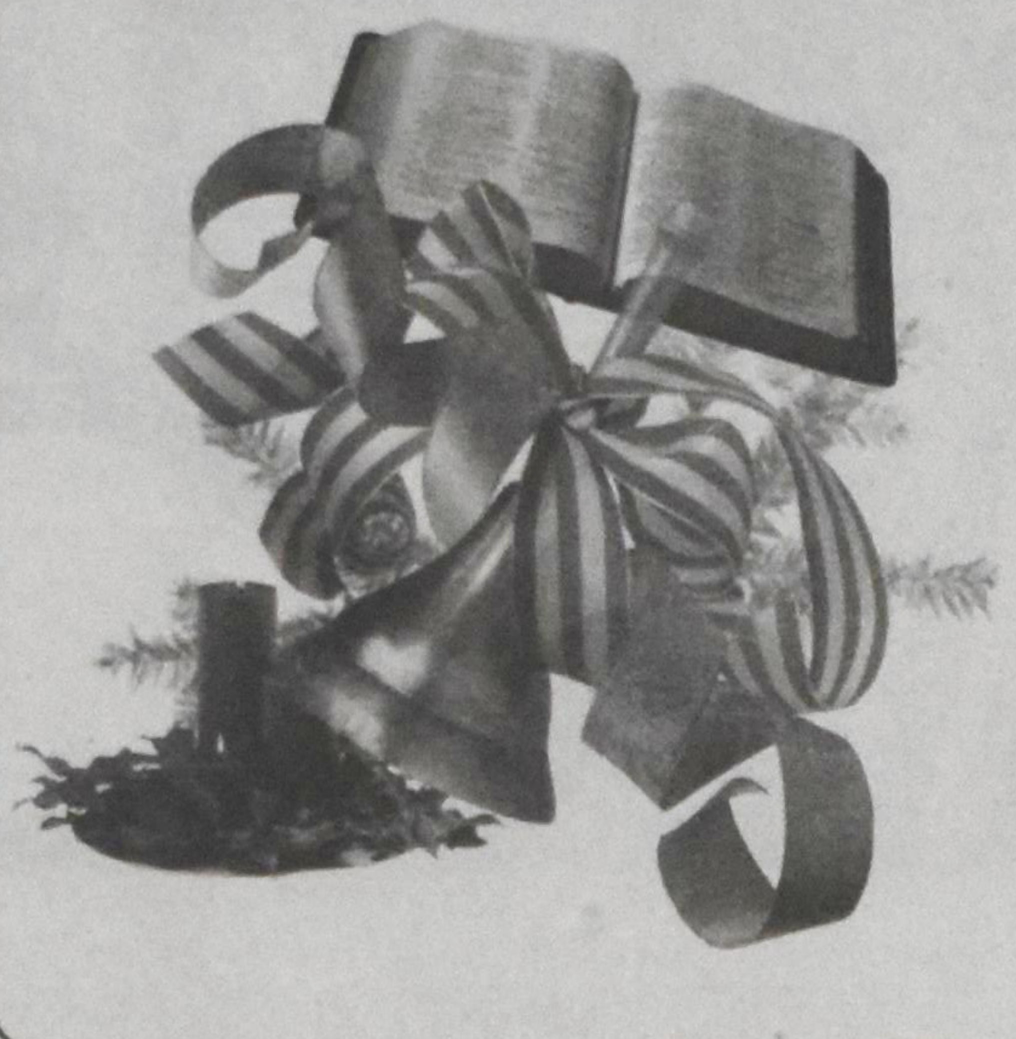
Brampton, Ontario
www.hch.ca

Glory to God in the highest
and on earth peace
to men on whom his favour rests.
Luke 2:14



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Mr. & Mrs. Louw & Willy VanMarrum	KT203
Peter Veenstra	TT116
Hannah Kienecker	TT310

Would You Follow?

How many would follow the star tonight
If it shone past the Milky Way,
Leave comfortable homes and follow it still
Over the hills and away?

How many would open their doors tonight
For a weary and shabby pair,
Make room at hearths for a Stranger-Child,
Though the Infant be wondrous fair?

How many would give of their goods tonight
The best they possess and more,
For their faith in a star and an angel choir
And a King forevermore?

We censure the folk of a bygone time
For indifference to Mary's plight.
How many would do any better now?
Would you follow the star tonight?

Helen E. Middleton

The residents of **Shalom Manor & Shalom Gardens**, Grimsby, Ontario, a Christian Long-Term Care Home and Retirement Centre wish to convey to you, their loved ones and friends,their best wishes in the Christmas Season and for the New Year 2009.

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us...John 1:14

Shalom Manor Residents

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Rev. Johannes & Mrs. Mildred Bekkering
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Mr. Marten VanDyk
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Mrs. Engelina Westland
Mrs. Alberdina Wilbrink
Mrs. Kunje Woudenberg

Shalom Gardens Residents

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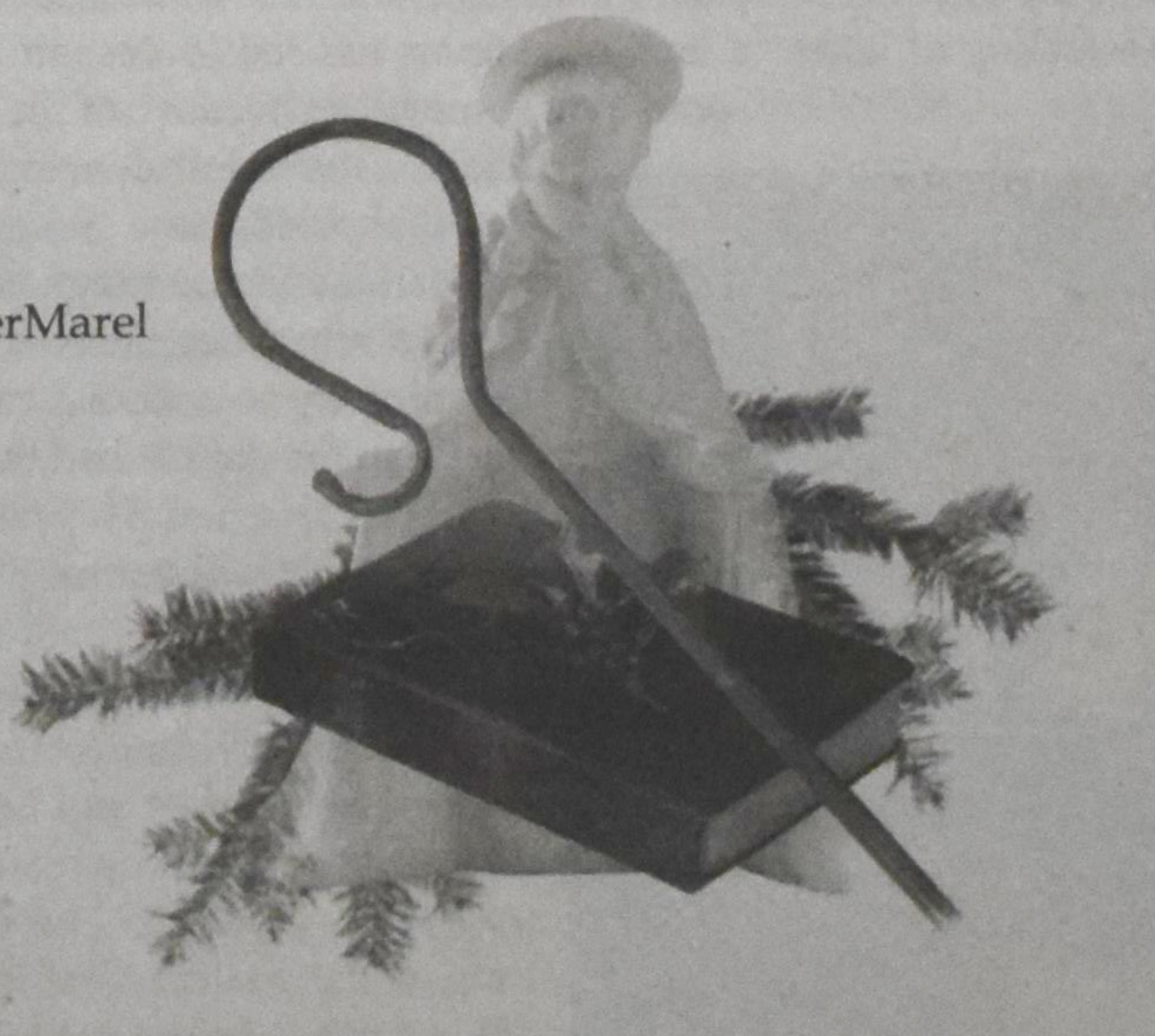
Mrs. Tine Buma
Mrs. Shirley Fluit
Mr. Klaas & Mrs. Wilma Hessels
Mrs. Trudy Joldersma
Mr. John Opthof
Mr. Henry & Mrs. Theresa Smeenk
Mr. Clarence & Mrs. Jessie Terpstra
Mrs. Joyce VanGeest
Mr. Lammert & Mrs. Wilma Veenema
Mrs. Fenna Vermeulen



Wishing you all the joys His love brings

Life in a fishbowl

... continued from p. 17

Bernice Steenbergen on the other hand has 19 years as a pastor's spouse under her belt. Her spouse, Henry, was ordained nearly two decades ago, and together they've served churches in Ontario, B.C. and now Alberta. Steenbergen attended her first pastors' spouse conference two years ago in Toronto, Ontario, and attended again this past fall in Grand Rapids. She recalls listening while the M.C. opened the Toronto conference with a simple, heartfelt thank you to pastors' spouses on behalf of the whole denomination. "I choked up," says Steenbergen, her emotions taking her by surprise. "The speakers' words caught me off guard. I really hadn't thought to attend the conference because of any need," Steenbergen says.

What Steenbergen found so moving that day was the realization that she was appreciated and valued for the role she had played in the church's ministry. Perhaps what pastors' spouses need more than anything eise is the easiest of all gifts for churches to give: simple gratitude.

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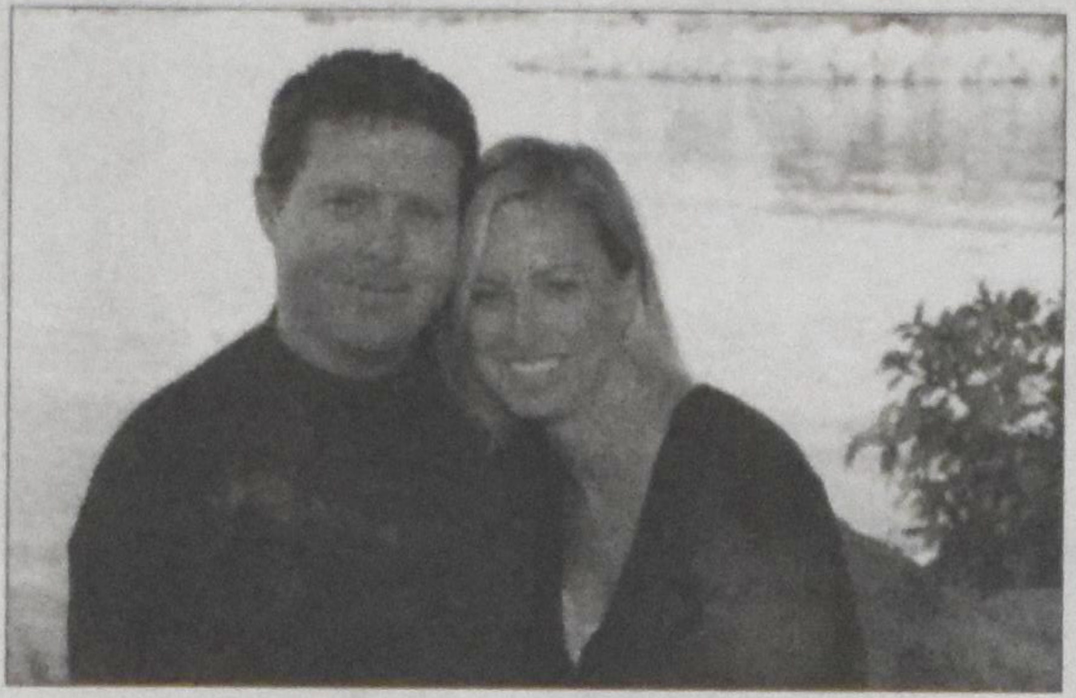
Classifieds

Wedding



Believing that God brought them together,

Beatrice Juliet Christiaanse
&
Shane Eric Baker

exchanged marriage vows on Saturday, November 15, 2008.
Richmond Hill United Church, Richmond Hill
The Rev. Bob Gould, Bayview Glen Church, Thornhill, officiating

Address: 16 Glenwood Crescent, Toronto ON M4B 1J6

Milestones

Drayton 1968 Kemptville 2008

"*Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path*"
Psalm 119:105.

HARMEN & ELIZABETH (BETTY) BOERSMA

reached their 40th wedding anniversary on March 1. The family party happened from Sept 2 - 9. Betty reached her 65th in Feb and Harmen retired on May 1. These milestones were celebrated with thanksgiving and joy along with their children and grandchildren.

Gerald & Karen Boersma - Vancouver, BC
Nathan, Calvin
Jason & Jeanette Boyes - Peterborough, ON
Hannah, Charlotte
Harvey Boersma - Ottawa, ON
Brett & Sigrid House - Lewisburg, WV
Gordon Boersma - Calgary, AB

Address: 1683 S. River Road, RR #4,
Kemptville, ON, K0G 1J0

Anniversary

Sarnia, Ontario 1958 – December 27 – 2008 St Catharines Ont.

SENSE (STAN) & CORRIE DE JONG (nee **Smit**)

Wedding text: Proverbs 3:5&6

Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.

Celebrating **50 Years of Marriage** is a wonderful thing, increasingly rare in this day and age. The Lord has blessed Dad & Mom richly and his Word has provided a steadfast and firm foundation for their lives. In your 70+ years, you have witnessed the tensions and upheaval of World War II – as teenagers you joined the post-war wave of immigrants to the new world of Canada, trading the familiar for the unknown; yours was the generation that sacrificed to start Christian churches, schools and other organizations. You "recycled, reused and renewed" before it was a popular catchphrase; you taught us to appreciate classical & choral music; we experienced the beauty of God's creation from one end of Canada to the other; you gave to us a love of books and words, especially God's Word. Your children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren thank the Lord for you and congratulate you. May our Lord grant you health and strength for many more years of continued service in his Kingdom.

Love from your family:
Anita & Dave Sikkema, *Hanford, CA*
Christine & Marc Radsma
Marshall, Michaela, Isaac, Eve, Solomon, *Beamsville, ON*
Dave & Andrea
Joshua, Malachi, Mattea, Emma, *St. Catharines, ON*
Joe & Michelle – Kaiya, *Loma Linda, CA*
James & Evelina – Jalen, Kenyon, *St. Catharines, ON*
Mitch & Dana – Rebekah, *St. Catharines, ON*
John & Wynne Watt – Samuel, *Toronto, ON*
Kevin & Heather – Rachel, Zachary, Ethan, *Owen Sound, ON*
Paul & Nycole – Natasja, *Calgary, AB*

Home address: 204 - 99A Scott Street, St Catharines ON L2N 1G8
email: sencor@sympatico.ca

Anniversary

JAMES AND ADRIANA (DeWolf) VAN WEELDEN

30-10 Wentworth Drive, Grimsby ON L3M 5G3
will celebrate **65 Years of Marriage**
on December 28, 2008.

Children – James (deceased), Jeralyn (David Enns), Alan (Pamela), Patricia, Susan, Joel (Yvette), 12 grandchildren, 9 great-grandchildren.

"We thank God for his faithfulness and for you and your constant love and care for each other and for us."

Obituaries

Bradford, Ontario
May 31, 1944

Orillia, Ontario
November 3, 2008

Trust in the LORD with all thine heart;
and lean not unto thine own understanding.
In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths.
Proverbs 3:5-6

ANNE MARIE VANDERKKUYT
nee **Sneep**

At her home in Orillia with family at her side after a long courageous battle with cancer the Lord took her home.

Beloved wife of Bert VandeKuyt
Much loved mother and grandmother of:
Bert & Deb – Lara, Ethan, *Kitchener, Ont.*
Derek & Patti – Kody, Zackary, *Livonia, Michigan*
and the late Jason and Andrew.
Dear sister of: Jean Bierling, *Innisfil, Ont.*
John & Rose Sneep, *Florida*
Wendy & Harry VanderTol, *Brampton, Ont.*
and the late Neil Sneep
Memorial services were held on Nov. 8, 2008 at the Orillia Christian Reformed Church.

Correspondence address: 1180 Brodie Dr RR 4,
Orillia ON L3V 6H4

RALPH BRUS

After a short hospitalization, our dear husband, and father, Ralph Brus of Listowel, passed away very peacefully into the wide-open arms of Jesus, early Saturday morning, November 22, 2008.

Remembered with great affection by Audrey (Woudstra) Brus, his wife of fifty years, and his children,
John and Grace Brus, *London*
Helen and John Greydanus, R.R. 1, *Gowanstown*
Wilma and Kevin VanderLeek *,Surrey, BC*
Bernie and Arlene Brus, *Elora*
Gerald Brus, *Listowel*
Elaine and Tim Beaman, *London*

Loved also by 16 grandchildren, two great-grandchildren, one sister and four brothers.

Predeceased by his parents and two brothers.

Visitation was held at the Eaton Funeral Home, Listowel on Monday. Funeral service was held at Bethel Christian Reformed Church, Listowel on Tuesday, November 25th at 11:00 a.m. Pastor Ron Fisher officiated. Memorial donations to Listowel Christian School would be appreciated.

Online condolences may be left at www.eatonfuneralhome.ca

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Will be available mid February 2009. Please call John or Jennifer Nobels at **905-692-6201** for more information.

Obituaries

Groningen, May 18, 1936 Brampton, October 21, 2008

TINEKE LUTGENDORFF-VRIELING

Tineke died peacefully at home after a rich life of service in Christian education as a teacher of small children who were the love of her life. She struggled with lung cancer for three years, and was an inspiration to all who knew her.

Psalm 8 was her choice for meditation at the funeral service.

She was the beloved wife of John for 49 years, The loving mother of Larry Lutgendorff and Wilma Bakker *of Kitchener* and Marilyn Lutgendorff *of Brampton*, Cherished Oma of John and Jennifer.

Loving daughter of Tiesina Lemain-Vrieling and the late Jacob Vrieling of Groningen, Sister of John Egbert Vrieling *of Orillia*, Jim and Miep Vrieling *of Brampton*, Thea and Freerk Zigterman and Koos and Ali Vrieling *of the Netherlands*. Sister-in-law of Edith and John Vos *of Navan*, Sam Lutgendorff *of Newmarket*, and Alan and Margriet Lutgendorff *of Timmins*.
Sadly missed by nieces, nephews, family and friends.

The funeral service was held in Crosspoint CRC, and interment took place in Meadowvale Cemetery in Brampton.

Correspondence: John Lutgendorff, Apt 403 - 310 Mill Street S, Brampton ON L6Y 3B1

On November 3, 2008 our dear sister-in-law

ANNE MARIE VANDERKKUYT nee Sneep

was called home by our Lord to be with him forever. Our thoughts and prayers are with Bert, children and grandchildren. May God comfort and surround you all.

Psalm 27

Hank & Leila Kruyf, *North York, Ont.*
Maria & John Verschoor, *Mount Hope, Ont.*
Corrie & Bert VanderHoef, *Willowdale, Ont.*
Wilma & John TenBrinke, *Dunnville, Ont.*
Harry & Ann VandeKuyt, *Ancaster, Ont.*
George & Liz VandeKuyt, *Mount Hope, Ont*
John Vandekuyt, *Hamilton, Ont.*
Many nephews and nieces

The Lord was Anne's light and she knew she was saved by his grace.
God gave her gifts to share on this earth throughout all her living days.
The Lord was her stronghold when illness struck her and she was confident.
That God would help her through it no matter what was sent.
She shared her faith with those she met and many lives she did touch
With the love of God that meant so much.
She waited for the Lord to take her home eternally.
And now she is with him who gave himself so freely.
Thank you God for Anne and the many blessings you give.
Great is your faithfulness to all those who live.

Personal

36 year-old single Christian woman from the greater Toronto area would like to correspond/meet a single Christian man.
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c/o Christian Courier
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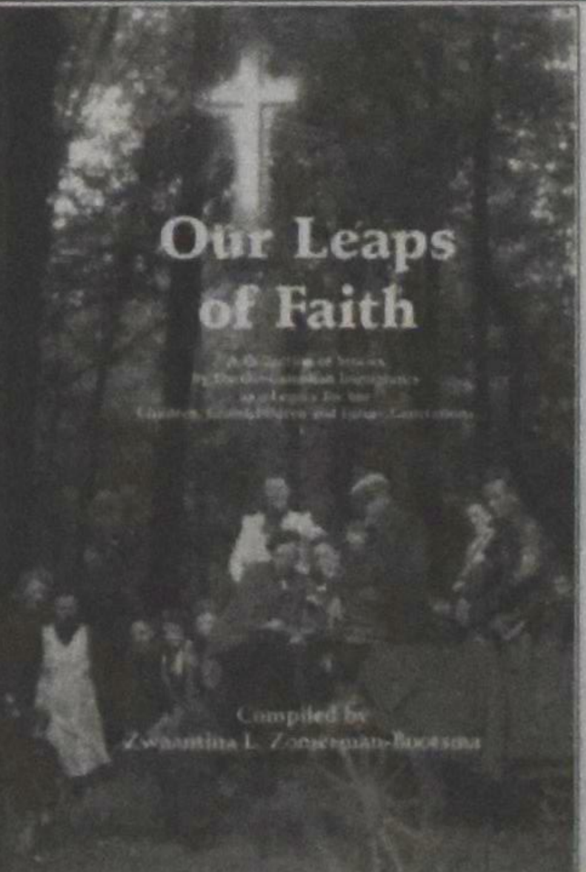

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Rocky Mountain House,
AB T4T 2A3

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miedemas@rogers.com
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Church Website:
www.willowdalecrc.com.

Classifieds

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Visit our website at **www.crcna.org** for complete job description and to apply.

Application deadline is January 31, 2009.

Maranatha Christian Academy in Windsor, Ontario
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Maranatha Christian Academy is an interdenominational school serving Christian families in Windsor since 1985. Current enrollment is 235 consisting of 166 elementary, and 69 high school students. An experienced staff of 25 serves students from JK to grade 12.
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Interested applicants should send a current resume, statement of faith and statement of commitment to Christian education to:
Principal Search Committee
939 Northwood, Windsor,ON N9E 1A2
Or by email to: pbaljeu@primus.ca

For more information about the school, please see
www.maranathachristian.ca
Application deadline is January 16, 2009

Trenton Christian School

FULL-TIME SCHOOL PRINCIPAL

TCS, a multi-denominational elementary school, is seeking a Principal, commencing August 1, 2009. TCS is a CHI accredited school which includes 240 students from 133 families and a faculty of 23.
Qualified individuals should send their resumes, along with their philosophy of education, and statement of faith before December 31, 2008 to:
Linda Wikkerink, Board Chair
Trenton Christian School
340 Second Dug Hill Rd., RR# 1,
Trenton, ON K8V 5P4

Email: tcs@reach.net Website: www.trentonchristianschool.com

Hope CRC of Brantford, Ontario is seeking a

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Job description and church profile are available by contacting

Elaine van Wyngaarden (search Committee chair)
at 519-756-8524 (email: dealk@rogers.com)
or Pastor Ken Benjamins at 519-759-7581
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Classis Alberta North
is seeking an ordained, **experienced pastor** to fill a

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More details can be found at classisalbertanorth.org under "Documents" "Classis Fall 2008" p. 24-26.

Questions? Contact Pastor Mike Vandyk (pastor6@telus.net) or call (403) 782-5050.

Application deadline January 31, 2009.

Dordt College

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E-mail: provost@dordt.edu — Phone: (712) 722-6333
Web site: www.dordt.edu/offices/academic_affairs

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Dordt College, 498 Fourth Ave NE, Sioux Center, IA 51250

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Classifieds

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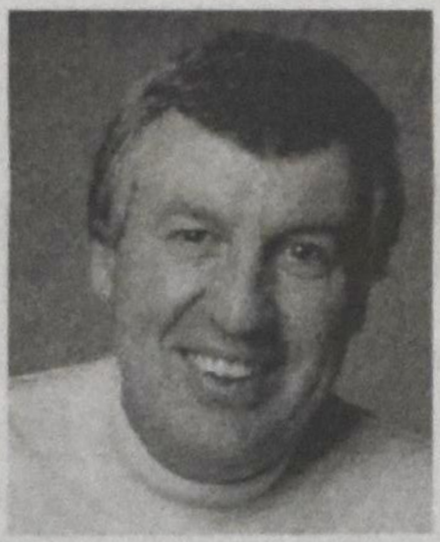

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Events/Advertising

CALENDAR OF EVENTS - 2008

Dec 7 Dutch Christmas Carol service at Emmanuel Reformed Church, 170 Clarke St. **Woodstock** at 7:00 p.m. Rev. Henry DeBolster giving the message, Choir singing Babysitting available, Refreshments provided after the service.

Dec 7 St. Lukes Annual Christmas Concert 3:00 p.m. We will feature 25 members of the Liberation Choir in this annual event at St. Lukes Anglican Church, 1382 Ontario St, **Burlington**, ON.

Dec 13 The Liberation Choir will lead the 5th Annual Christmas Sing-a-long Concert, 7 p.m. at Rehoboth Christian Reformed Church in Bowmanville,130 Scugog Rd, **Bowmanville**. ON

Dec 17 The Ambassadors Christian Male Chorus and The Ladies Advent Singers will render a concert of praise to Christ the King at 8:00 p.m. in Mt. **Hamilton** Christian Reformed Church. 1411 Upper Wellington Street. Freewill offering.

Dec 19 The Ambassadors and Ladies Advent Singers are guests at The Holland Christian Homes annual participating Christmas concert at 7:30 p.m. Offering for HCH's broadcast ministries.

Dec 20 The Liberation Choir 5th Annual Christmas Sing-a-long Concert with the Steeltown Orchestra. at 7 p.m. at St. Giles United Church, Main St E & 85 Holton Ave S, **Hamilton**.

Dec 21 Liberation Choir Georgetown/Salvation Army Christmas fundraiser Charity Concert 7 p.m. Georgetown Christian Reformed Church, 1161 Trafalgar Road, **Georgetown**, ON

Jan 25, 2009 - Dutch Service will be held in the **Ancaster** Christian Reformed Church at 3:00 p.m. Rev. Jacob Kuntz will be preaching.

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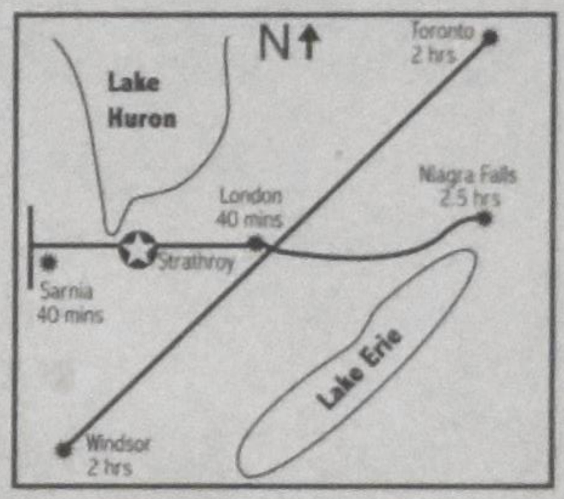

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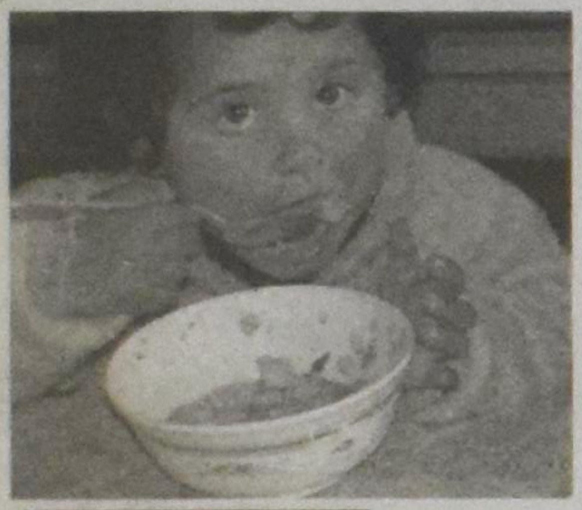

Watch for ...
Gift Giving Guide
inserted in the Nov. 24th issue

Blessed is he who is kind to the needy
Prov 14:21b

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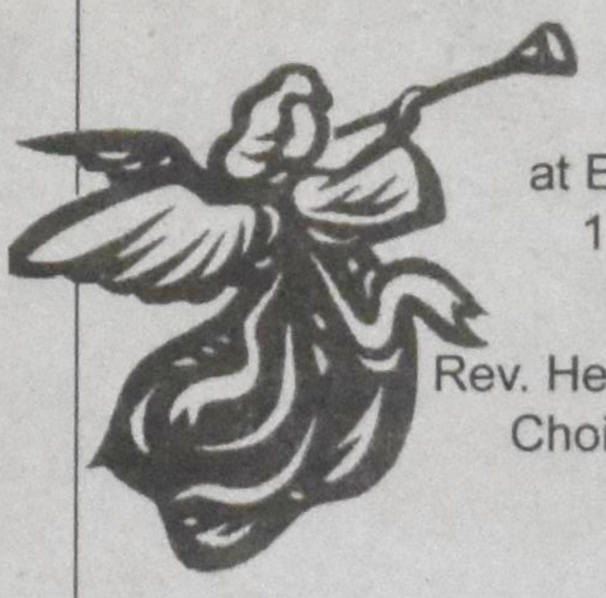
Dutch Christmas Carol Service



at Emmanuel Reformed Church
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December 7 at 7:00 p.m.
Rev. Henry DeBolster giving the message.
Choir singing. Babysitting provided.
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Accompanist - Sharon Sandink
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Greetings of the Season and Best Wishes for the New Year

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We, the staff and board of Christian Courier wish our readers all the blessings of peace – reconciliation with God and with one another – this season and throughout the coming year.

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